Pink Lotus

A Comedy in Kashmir

May Crommelin

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PINK LOTUS

A COMEDY IN KASHMIR

BY

MAY CROMMELIN

Author of

"Brown Eyes," "Kinsah," "Lovers on the Green,"

etc.

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PINK LOTUS

CHAPTER I

"WELL?"

"WELL!" said Mrs. Wray finally.

It was a not unusual ending to a conversation when one has listened with all the patience, interest and sympathy at command to intimate details of a last illness which provokes the carefully hidden thought that "some things are all for the best! and this decease was one of them."

"Poor old uncle," sighed Peggy, in a tone accepting the hint bringing a close to her recital. "Well—as you say, or meant, he was always a good quiet man, and no doubt he is in Heaven now, and much happier than down here."

"Heaven—hell! What crude ideas you have, dear child. I believe in seven heavens; Saint Paul got as far as the third. And as to degrees and states in Paradise—" The speaker waved a peculiarly expressive hand intimating that their variety was presumably past all imagination.

"O—h!" Peggy opened her eyes wide. At that moment they looked a tender green to her older friend's glance. Never could she determine whether the girl's

eyes were grey or blue; only they were always limpid, large and took on reflections from outer things affecting these mirrors of her mind. "But don't you believe we shall all meet? All of us that is who—who—ought. Who knew each other down here and loved or tried to like . . . or to get on together."

Again Mrs. Wray's delicate hands fluttered up, in deprecation this time, her mobile mouth twisted into a wry smile.

"Gracious! Why, there are troops of bores we piously hope will go when they pass on from here to a good place. But one trusts still more devoutly it won't be within visiting distance of our place. I'm not in the least irreverent, but I've got imagination, thank goodness. I mean to try and scrape acquaintance with all sorts of desirable people who lived before my turn came. Horace and Jane Austen and Sydney Smith and Pepys. And I'd love to make my courteous salutations to Sappho, and all the mighty throng who must be as gods together—not that they would be likely to throw me a nod. And decidedly I must ask who wrote the book of Job."

Her brilliant dark eyes flashed in enthusiasm, but Peggy was not roused as the speaker hoped from an unyouthful listlessness brought about by nursing a selfish and querulous invalid. What a white rosebud face it was! thought Roma Wray, concernedly. Certainly an ill-fitting black dress added to a provincial jacket and hat made a most unbecoming setting to the pale girl, whose colouring had been her charm. Only the red golden hair looked still belonging to pretty Peggy, and even that seemed to have lost its fluffiness and some of its gloss.

The young visitor's gaze was wandering round the handsome Jacobean room, admiring its stuccoed ceiling with deep panels and wreaths, the heavy mullioned bay windows where she had often lounged for hours in the wide cushioned seats, the handsomely carved chimney-

piece over a flat hearth where logs glowed. Often as Peggy Lee had seen her neighbour's home she as invariably admired it, and above all, this drawing-room with its treasures of old English furniture and china, its Gainsborough landscape, and its Claude sunset. There was no overcrowding; everything was harmonious.

"Oh, if you would only come down one whole day and help me to make Cowford more like this. I might surely alter it *now*," burst out irrelevantly. Then a sigh blurred the wish, and there followed: "But, no, no, darling. Even you can't mend matters there. Don't mind."

"But I could. I'd just love it! For years my fingers have tingled to pull your splendid old chests from dark corners. I've positively ached to show what could be done with a genuine, unspoilt Elizabethan pannelled manor house," cried Roma. "Cowford is unique: it only wants air and light—those creepers positively smother the panes—and—and——"

"Cleaning!" nodded Peggy gloomily. "Well, now, I may at least do *that*. But, otherwise . . ."

Her lips parted on the brink of a confidence. Her companion strained to catch its first glimmer with a second "Well?"—this time insinuating the syllable.

Again that disappointing child shied off, murmuring: "But my one ideal of a sitting-room in the country is to have it upstairs—like this. The far views, away for miles, and the whole garden design outspread below, instead of just seeing edges of flower-beds and gravel paths with bushes blocking one's outlook. Stifling."

"Of course, you must feel choked, when your uncle allowed everything to grow wild, though I told him visitors had to duck under the branches in the very drive. But, bless you! with hatchets and pruning hooks we'll hew an Eden out of your wilderness by next summer," assured Roma consolingly.

To her surprise a slight headshake came in reply and

again Peggy's pretty lips parted, hesitated, then shut tight. No wonder Roma felt impatient and inclined to shake her favourite. For had she not put aside a whole series of country-house invitations and shortened her London winter visit because poor, lonely, little Peggy had written her thanks for a funeral wreath (the only one contributed by any of the neighbours), and ending, "You can't think how I pine for your dear voice and face. Besides there is *Something* most important on my mind that I can't tell at present to any other living soul."

That brought back the woman who for the past ten years had been as much a friend and protectress to her orphaned young neighbour as half a mile of distance across the meadows and Peggy's queer, huffy old recluse of an uncle permitted.

"What! Am I no good—of no possible assistance?" The elder paused, sorry rather than offended; still, never before had her help been refused by this devoted young disciple.

Then, with an earnest glance: "You understand, dear, that only for that motor accident and getting neuritis from sitting hours on a roadside in the rain, and being ordered an electric cure, I'd have been with you from the very beginning of the last illness and have nursed —well, as much as your uncle would have allowed. He always endured me tolerantly. He even liked our games of backgammon."

Peggy bounded on her chair.

"Darling! It's not that! You are, as always, my good angel. Only—I can't just yet . . . but I will presently . . . be able to tell——"

"Of course." Roma glanced at the grandfather clock. "Why, it's only four. Who on earth ever can talk comfortably before half-past four or five? The early afternoon is a time only fit for going out, getting somewhere, or doing something. Come along and see the greenhouses.

My hat's in the hall downstairs, and there's sure to be a jacket of sorts."

In her deerstalker coat and cap Mrs. Wray, with a short tweed skirt and a walking-stick, looked a typical country gentlewoman. Peggy Lee in her crape trimmings and smooth black dress, an edging of bugles round her hat brim—(Shades of our grand-aunt spinsters! Roma shuddered at the sight.)—Peggy in mourning garb, resembled a young person in her best, ready to drive in a gig to a funereal family tea in the market town. But not so her manner.

Revived by the fresh wintry air, the girl's features lit up, her feet felt like dancing as they mounted to the upper terrace sheltered by pines, where a vista showed of low-lying rich valley and distant Welsh mountains. A pale blue sky, a breeze scented with pine resin, the sense of wide health-giving space, of friendly environment, all brought back gladness to her youthful being, long starved of natural, mirthful nourishment, but never ceasing to seek diligently and enjoy all crumbs of comfort.

She threw out her arms and drew a long breath.

"Grand. I'd love to give a good Tally-ho! It's all your coming back. Auntie Roma, I just feel alive again."

Auntie, so called, who was no earthly (or spiritual) relation, caught herself smirking in satisfaction.

"Do you remember when the clover was out below there, before the croquet lawn was mown in Spring? You got a mad fit and rushed down here to fling yourself face downward, because the blobs were so sweet and cushiony."

"I'll do it again without the clover." Peggy gave herself an encouraging screech and ran headlong down the slope that was particularly steep and high. A few breathless seconds and she had thrown herself or fallen in a formless heap on the damp grass and lay there laughing.

"A most ungraceful performance. Any actress would

be booed off a country stage who flopped and showed half a yard of petticoat like that when she did a fall. Come round by the steps. I'm not going to sprain my ankles or dig heel-marks in the grass by attempting such pranks."

Roma stood scolding and smiling above, but her heart felt touched, almost sore.

" Poor, poor child ! When I was a girl I used to let off steam very differently. Fancy running downhill alone and tumbling head over heels—or very nearly—instead of a glorious gallop to hounds, or a Merry Widow waltz, or yachting in a stiff breeze, and all with a Somebody Else whom one thought *pro tem.* adorable, or anyway who adored oneself.—Oh, my Peggy-kin ! And now she's an heiress and will never be quite sure—— Here you are ! "

A bright-eyed, if blowsy, Peggy arrived, with the bugle hat slightly awry and the prim dress a little shocked at its treatment.

To the greenhouses they went in the south-sloping garden, high-walled, their mellow brick traceried with fruit trees. There Mrs. Wray's old family gardener welcomed Miss Peggy and hoped she was in pretty good health, with an implied sympathy doing credit to his tact. Roma, who adored her flowers, eagerly displayed new acquisitions, pressing acceptance of pots and cuttings whenever Peggy admired or should have admired anything, till the gardener, who at first backed up his mistress, began to look serious.

" It's to be hoped you have the heat for these—and room, Miss. Last time I was over at your place—it's near eight, or maybe nine months—the houses was mostly taken up with tomatoes and such-like."

" Rubbish ! " nodded Peggy. " But I'm making a clean sweep. Old Bagley has left me—that is, he had an accident, and his leg is broken."

" So I heard ; so I heard. Coming home from last fair."

The gardener's tone was ruminating, respectful, yet somehow regretfully significant. "And so you will be wanting a new man, Miss?"

"I have engaged one, this very morning. Do you not know yet? No. I remember he had to go back straight. He is"—in modest triumph at telling agreeable news—"your son, Tom. He says he would rather be first in my small place than second in the big market-garden."

Both her hearers were surprised and pleased. The new mistress of Cowford beamed, but took the opportunity of warning Tom's parent that economy must be the order of the day for some time in her establishment. She could not afford to do things in the style of The Mount, nor even as in *our* past. "No more bottles of port for the melons."

"*Port*—port wine? Would that be for the table?" asked the old man, knitting his bushy brows, while Mrs. Wray also looked puzzled.

"No, to nourish them. My uncle used always to give a bottle or two because Bagley said it was a capital thing to make a little hole and pour some in to improve the flavour. Why——?"

The youthful lady of Cowford Manor stopped, discomposed, for Roma Wray was laughing unrestrainedly. The old gardener had turned away, but his shoulders were shaking.

Presently he fetched down a special pot of stripto carpus as his own offering, remarking with twitching features:

"If my son Tom asks for port wine for his melons, Miss Peggy, just you tell *me*. That's all."

Mrs. Wray did well most things she undertook, putting "her mind into them," she said. Among these, in Peggy's opinion, was her way of giving, somehow, better afternoon tea than anyone else. She herself watched the silver kettle boiling to the right point, and used the most delicious

tea, sent her by a former admirer now in Assam ; then her scones, china, all appurtenances to the afternoon ceremony, were, as Peggy said for the hundredth time, perfect.

" Heugh ! " scoffed Roma. " If you knew how sick I am of the monotony of this habit of ours. The Tyranny of the Teapot, I call it. It has taken such a hold upon all the modern world that *nothing* can be done through an afternoon without even men, especially young men, reckoning seriously " What about tea ? " The other day one of the papers gave a forecast of a daily aerial service between London and Paris, and said that our business men who went over for the day could have afternoon tea served on board the airships : as much as to say that otherwise the new means of transport would be a failure. Why, look at hunting men ! They will go without lunch and never give it a thought, but without tea when they get back—never ! "

Peggy promptly took up her cup with a tilted little finger, and said in affectedly genteel tones : " But don't you always think that there is nothing so refreshing as a cup of——"

" Wretch ! you little minx ! How dare you, when you know that no other platitude drives me so wild when the Avonbridge women pay me their duty visits ! " shrieked Roma, who, always full of life, was more excitable than usual to-day, with purpose to wake up her favourite guest.

Peggy wrinkled her nose in an indescribably impudent manner. " Scored—melons paid for."

" But I am serious. This tea-habit is like a new disease : a kind of society phylloxera. Last year I hoped to get away from it when I took that tour in France—and to have coffee instead. Not a bit of it ! In the most unlikely out-of-the-way towns there at the inn was painted under the sign : ' Le Five o'Clock.' And "—bitterly—" it was actually good tea, too ! "

" How aggravating ! " twinkled Peggy. " One could

forgive them if it was 'hot water bewitched' as my nurse used to say."

Aloud Mrs. Wray threatened, "Don't be impudent!"

Inwardly she rejoiced.

("Thank goodness, the chit is getting like herself again!") So briskly ringing the bell, the mistress ordered away the tea-things. Then when they two were freed from interruption, she moved to the most comfortable sofa, motioned the girl to her side, thrust cushions behind her guest, patted her hand and ejaculated once more, this time in affectionate entreaty, "*Well?*"

Peggy's face twitched slightly, but she was resolved to be valiant. This was the hour, the true confidante, for which she had been waiting, so she murmured:

"I've been just counting the days till you came back to tell you. No one else guesses——"

"Child! You are not engaged to anyone?" Roma's voice was slightly sharp with sudden dread, for who was there in their quiet neighbourhood that could be called a decent match for the young heiress of the deceased squire, or even for Peggy penniless? An aged bachelor rector, two lumpish, farmer-ish brothers, of the lesser gentry kind, that pert young solicitor. A sobbing laugh came in reply, and the extraordinary words:

"Not I—but I may be presently. And not to anyone you or I have ever yet beheld. Read that—and see his name."

She drew out an envelope inscribed in handwriting looking much as if a spider escaped from an inkpot had crawled over the missive.

"Private and confidential. Directions for my niece, Margaret Lee."

"To be read only by herself after my Buryal."

As directed, Mrs. Wray took out a letter, peering at the

feeble caligraphy through her lorgnette. Peggy meanwhile eagerly watched her best friend's face, that suddenly expressed surprise by raised eyebrows, then dismay in drooping muscles. Mrs. Wray's breath came short, her eyes shot angry sparks, and a flush of dark red indignation renewed momentarily the freshness of first youth in her handsome face.

Her gaze devoured the lines. Then her fingers dropped the letter as if it were a something noxious, repellent. Dark eyes looked full of amazed sympathy at a resigned young face, grown pale again but with rosebud mouth shut tight.

"*Well ! ! !*" ejaculated Roma Wray, positively gasping. "*I never——* "

CHAPTER II

THE PINCH OF THE DEAD MAN'S SHOE

ONCE more Roma Wray took up the offending letter, and this time slowly read it aloud, "to get at the sense of it," she said, whilst Peggy, who knew it by heart, assisted by promptings at any pause over some word more indistinct than the rest of the feeble scratchings. With inward disfavour the reader glossed over the inelegance, not to say illiteracy, of the composition, but she stopped dead at times, pointing a condemning finger, when her ire waxed specially hot to utter her commentary; thus:

> "My Dear Niece Margaret,
>
> "By the time you open this it will see me Dead and buryed. Also my Will will have been read leaving you all my property, which will be a considerable burden for a Woman."

'Fiddlesticks! The Cowford estate can't be as much as this. (Excuse me for being frank, child!) And I could carry a little more of the burden gaily on my back!"

> "Since making my Will, doubts have lately arisen troubling me as to wether this disposal of the family Estate is right, seeing your sex debars you from carrying on the Family Name, except with a hyfen

and double names have always struck me as vulgar ostentation."

"Isn't that like your uncle? He never made a move at backgammon without immediately sighing and wishing to take it back, and often I allowed him to do so. But the idea of his only sister's only child not being his rightful representative! It makes me wild. When England could be governed over half a century by a woman, Cowford, if you please, can't! As to double names—it is queer how fastidious some men can be about some things, and yet——" She uplifted her chin, recalling that the deceased had often in latter days of growing senility distressed his niece and offended herself as visitor by forgetting some of civilization's lesser triumphs over nature.

"Don't mind the spelling," entreated Peggy apologetically. "He never *could* spell; and yet he was very learned in some ways, was he not?"

"In beetles and what d'ye call insect-ology? Yes, I suppose he was; we take it for granted."

"The other heir next to you is my second cousin Ralph Bowman, a young officer in an Indian Horse regiment. As a boy he visited Cowford at my desire, but offended me by rude remarks and the usual boysterous manners of his kind. When you came later you were on the contrary a nice, quiet, little girl."——

"Don't I remember you! A white-faced, frightened mite, in deep black. I never was more sorry for any chick!"

"However on reflexion it appears to me a Xtian duty to overlook what may have been the faults of youth always an age of such. Perhaps it would be better to make him my heir. But it would be too great an effort to make another will for my strentgh."

Mrs. Wray snorted the contempt of a thoroughbred female centaur.

"Therefore having implicit Confidence in your sense of honour and honesty, my dear child, it occurs to me to leave the matter in your hands, feeling certain you will always do what is right, in the wich you have never failed me since infancy, unless in some trifling naugtayness generally repented with tears."

"You made up for that, Miss, by your outbreaks with *me*, and if you had howled at my scoldings I would be ashamed now to look you in the face."

"Yes! but do! You have always said like everybody else that you have utterly spoilt me. Behold your handiwork," responded Peggy, giving her old friend a hug. "Go on! Now for the awful part of it!"

In stern tones the reader continued, with hardening face:

"It is accordingly my last Request that you should seek acquaintance with your Coz. who was unmarried when last I heard of him and as your Affections are at your age disengaged you should if he seems worthy offer him your hand. There need be no indelicacy in this if approached with Tact, seeing he has little fortune."

"*Great heavens!*"

"Should you deem him unfitting you must act as Conscience dictates. I will not bind you although wishful that the Bowman name should always be indentified with Cowford in the male gender.

"Yr. affect. Uncle,

"PEREGRINE BOWMAN."

"Outrageous! Perfectly preposterous! To shuffle off his own responsibilities on your young shoulders, you who were always better than any daughter out of a million to him. It positively chokes me. And"—after some moments of unspeakable sympathy—"after you and everybody else supposed the whole was yours without any abominable postscript like this!"

"Yes. That is the worst of it. But, please, darling" (this diffidently), "*don't* speak of the poor old fellow so unkindly now he's gone. I would not mind so much if he were alive, but—after all—I was fond of him. And he liked me too in his own way."

"So he ought," witheringly. "But still it is hard. . . . I'll tell you this, Peggy, without unkindness to him but just in fairness to *you*, your uncle had grown dot—well, feeble in mind of late years. Everyone around who saw him noticed it. Even when first I knew him he was a slave to indecision, and in old age want of will-power is a most ordinary failing. I tremble to think that if I live to be eighty I may not know my own mind, as to whether to put on my Mechlin cap or Honiton lappets."

The listener faintly smiled; there seemed so little possibility of such a change.

"Therefore," with intense earnestness, bringing all the force of personal magnetism, strong affection and great determination to bear upon the young and generally docile girl at her side, "listen and be advised by me, as your oldest and I think I may claim to be your most devoted friend—Put this thing out of your mind. Tear it up—now. Forget your poor old uncle's latter craziness, or weakness of mind to put it more delicately. And only remember he brought you up in every way as his heiress, solemnly made you so by will and *meant* it—or if he did not, then——!

Mrs. Wray broke off with gesture of hands and intonation of voice implying that then no censure could be suffi-

ciently scathing for the shilly-shallying of the late not-much-lamented master of Cowford.

But pale-faced Peggy only shook her head; then unlocked her curved lips to utter in distinct syllables:

"That I can't do. For the past month I have been thinking it over, continually. . . . In the end I saw it clear just as in the beginning . . . and I hoped—so much—you would agree and back me up."

"Margaret!! You don't mean——!"

"Yes, I do. This puts me on my honour," reaching out a firm small hand to regain possession of that most detestable letter. "I am resolved to carry out these instructions—to find this man, wherever he is, and if he seems to fancy me, well, I've got to take him."

"But you may not fancy him. Child, you are mad!"

"Why, I don't suppose he is worse than anybody else," this in a tone of tragic sadness. "But if he is—I'll turn hospital nurse and marry nobody."

"*That* does not follow, by any means." Mrs. Wray for the life of her could rarely help sarcasm, and this was an outlet for her feelings that were at exasperation height. Then in distracted bitterness of thought while striving for a clear, sane exposition of the case, "And if neither of you likes the other you cannot do so heartless and wrong a thing as to marry. So you will keep Cowford." There came a pause.

"No," whispered Peggy, in a choked voice. "I'll give it up to him." She burst into a storm of tears.

Next moment she was taken into the close, almost motherly embrace that for years had been her refuge.

CHAPTER III

NEW BROOMS

"GLORIOUS!" Roma Wray fairly panted as with a last vigorous hatchet-stroke she lopped down an obtrusive elderberry branch and hauled it herself to one side of the long disused carriage-drive. Ahead and behind sounded crashings of timber and labouring men's calls of advice or warning. Fully fifteen were hard at work, both The Mount farm and garden hands besides the Cowford staff, while carts were removing tree-trunks and boys stacked boughs in piles.

"Splendacious!" gasped Peggy, with small white teeth clenched as she made the chips fly from some ash saplings that had sprung impudently into a thicket where a side path used to be. "One could drive a coach and four up to the door now without anybody on the top being decapitated." Then stopping to impart confidence in a whisper reaching some feet of distance, "At the funeral the coffin had to be carried all the way, you know. And the doctor's carriage and another one or two waited at the lodge. The doctor always used to walk up, for one dark evening his horses were scratched when the carriage got stuck in the trees. Perhaps that made him send in such an awful bill. But, are you tired?"

"I'm no longer sweet and twenty." Roma flung down her light hatchet. "Come, this is only rough

work now that we've marked all the victims. Our genius is wasted and the garden is shrieking for aid; poor throttled, neglected Eden, left for years only to its ignorant young angel."

"Come along, Angel's Auntie, and listen to what this ignoramus has been planning, of course subject to your opinion."

Mrs. Wray indulgently nodded, aware that her counsel was of value. Little by little she grew surprised, repressing with difficulty criticism and her own eagle-eyed views, then assenting with growing good grace:

"Well! ye—es. Yes! . . . I see what you are driving at. . . . Certainly it's an idea! . . . Quite good and your own!" Lastly, with supreme self-effacement, "Why, you have a capital eye for a garden. I could not do better."

Peggy, her cheeks fire-red with the January wind and enthusiasm, pointed out an imaginary clear space in the over-grown garden showing splendidly the mullioned gabled back of the old house. Again from the porch how the view she loved in childhood of the ford and gleaming river shallows would be restored once alders and late-sprung willows were cleared away. Then the ragged yew hedge. Once it was clipped would mantling tropeolum be permissible? while a smooth grass band dotted with best standard roses should make a tidy edging. Oh, and the over-flowing, stagnant pond down in that shunned corner! As a little girl she used to sail paper boats there; then it was clear and there were fish. She thought of damming the tiny brook higher up and making a miniature waterfall.

It was as if a child were explaining her sand-castle or nursery flower plot with intense seriousness and the imagination that actually beholds its own creation. Meanwhile the listener felt her own rôle as an acknowledged landscape gardener appropriated, her teachings unconsciously

repeated by this beginner with possibly flattering imita tion, but ungrateful lack of recognition. Roma afterwards patted herself on the back for her self-effacement and judicious praise. She merely allowed herself a few sturdy remarks as to what a true Elizabethan garden in keeping with the genuine date of Cowford should not be, and offered to lend Bacon's Essays with that on a garden marked, a solicitude accepted by Miss Lee with touching deference.

"As to your pergola. The rose branches always tear one's hair-nets or catch in visitors' hats—but at least promise me to call it a pleached alley."

Peggy dutifully promised. She stood still and sighed.

"At all events, whatever happens it will be a satisfaction to feel I shall have left my mark on the dear old place. If only I did not love it so!"

"Good gracious, child. Common sense was your strong point. Don't pretend that a few weeks of comparative solitude have turned you into a puling self-martyred altruist. Was Fräulein no longer a homely tonic? Where is she, by the way?"

"Come and find her in the old schoolroom. Dear soul, she is always brimming with sympathy, sousing one with sentimental quotations from her best-loved poets. Goethe braces me, but she prefers others that soar above my material mind, so she laments."

In a low-beamed room, pleasant though darkened by dense creepers bristling a foot thick beyond the windows, forming a fortress of insects' armies, they found Fräulein Maier, Peggy's one and only governess in life. The dame showed indeterminate age and features. Thick coarse hair was plaited and tightly strapped over her head. Her nose made up for absence of bridge by cavernous nostrils, topped by an assertive button tip. This with a wide sensitive mouth, teeth not on speaking terms with one another and the complexion of a dyspeptic

sounds altogether unattractive. Yet few who saw Amalia Maier's eyes gleam when she smiled ever spoke slightingly of the good woman's looks. They were not beautiful eyes, but whenever her joy or sorrow were touched through sympathy with others, for she averred her own being was dead to such personal feelings, they could express the mute devotion of a dog or shine like village lights in a mirk winter night.

No friend could be more welcome than Mrs. Wray in Cowford schoolroom, yet as the visitor entered dismay overspread Fräulein's visage, and she seemed to find unaccountable difficulty in struggling out of a capacious shabby armchair.

"Ach, dear lady! Excuse me, but dese springs are broken."

"Again? They were mended last week," exclaimed their owner in artless surprise.

"Never mind springs. I am come to a fountain of wisdom and want a difficult passage in Nietzsche explained," said Roma, with familiar friendliness seating herself. "He says—but what on earth is that noise? Mice?"

For smothered squeaks or chirps were undeniably audible and curiously near. Like the others, Fräulein Maier cast her eyes round the room, yet a beetroot flush tipped her high cheek-bones. Peggy saw with the sharpness of her age and darted her needle glance down to the ample lap where something or things seemed to stir the surface of a dark blue apron, an integral portion of Fräulein's person in both schoolroom and fowl-yard, the respective abodes of her work and recreation. An accusing finger pointed—and visibly the worthy governess quailed.

"Ah! Naughty woman. I have found you out."

One ruthless twitch to the apron and a clutch of fluffy black and white chickens not long released from egg-prison lay revealed.

At the onlookers' laughter poor Amalia laughed too,

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though half inclined to cry. A luncheon gong interrupted the tender-hearted creature's flustered apologies to Mrs. Wray and explanations to Peggy that the "*Mutter*" was a flighty inexperienced young hen who had gone out for a long walk expecting these helpless innocents to follow her in the wet grass. Amalia, as a succouring foster-parent, had snatched them from cold and possibly too early death. Ach, to revive and watch the symptoms of life, beautiful life was——

"Watch me," mocked Peggy. "I'm half dead with hunger."

She and Roma left Fräulein hastily depositing her charges in the cat's basket by the fire, locking doors lest some maid might let in that injured animal and pussy right matters by accommodating the intruders in a still warmer enclosure whilst not ejecting them on resuming possession. This to an accompaniment of reproachful lament. "Ach, meine Pegchen! how is it possible you could so betray me; and how was it not possible? The gracious lady would never have guessed —Yes, I wash my hands and take my apron in haste off. But *wie ist es möglich*——"

If Mrs. Wray could not plead hunger she frankly confessed to greediness. The plumpness of the boiled chicken, which like women they all preferred to roast, was, she politely presumed, due to the Fräulein's care. But the ham! how was it cured? After what super-excellent recipe boiled? In champagne? (doubtfully). Never had she supposed the long (too long) established Cowford cook capable of such a culinary wonder.

"Not she," quoth Peggy, bluntly, choking down explanations till the parlour-maid left the room. "She never did anything for ages but sit tipsily in the corner and nag the kitchen-maid—*she* is my cook now. So two years ago I resolved to try my hand at hams and jams, and this is one result."

"You! And never told *me*. So young and so deceiving?"

"Because it is two and more years since I was able to ask you to lunch or dinner. So I waited patiently to give you a surprise and hear an honest opinion," this triumphantly.

"You have surprised me, indeed. And in my honest opinion, your talents, if ever you are driven to work," significantly, "lie in the kitchen sphere, not the hospital. By the way, Fräulein, as I understand the news has been broken to you that our frisky young friend means to take a wander-year, how shall you like being her companion?"

("Oh, don't! She was so miserable last night," warned Peggy, but too late.)

Fräulein Maier put down untouched the coffee-cup she had just raised to her lips, folded hands that slightly shook and said in honestly trembling accents, "Margaret knows that so long as it is my duty to protect her I will die radder than not do so. But to die on the ship assuredly must be my end. Since seven years when last I visited my home—that is some cousins who alone are left to me of relatives—and returned by Flushing, then I made my resolve if I lived never more to go upon the sea. O, *weh!* It was as the bitterness of one dozen deaths! It was—pardon the shameful truth—like being disembowelled alive. Therefore I will go—but in the Red Sea they will sew me in a sheet and trow me to the fishes. And I—" the unhappy lady gulped—"I have cherished so long time the one wish to end my days at Cowford. Pegchen would, I hoped, let me live some day in one of her *niedliche* cottages——"

As the speaker choked and wiped her eyes Roma shot a glance at Peggy implying, "See how your fine plan of renunciation will make other folks suffer," and the accused hung her head.

"Then beforehand I would buy me a sweet spot in this churchyard and plant it with flowers myself, as my—What is *denkmal* in English, my Peggy?"

"Think-spot," said Peggy shamelessly, recovering her spirits. "We have arranged it all. Fräulein is to water her own forget-me-nots with previous tears and I will add pansies with very black faces. Did *you* know that Germans call them *step-mothers* because they scowl?—that will remind me of the looks given me when lessons were not up to the mark. Then a birch-tree will be overhead. And I began saving up my pennies ages ago—she knows—because the tombstone is to be my offering. A fine, big, slate slab at the head is my idea; with a blackboard to be in keeping at her feet. As to the epitaph, I have beaten my stupid brains trying to compose something in German-English mixed, like

Wo am I? and *wer* is here
Brought to the Grab by just das Bier?

or else:

She raised the cane. I raised the cry.
I raised this stone. But she raised I."

"Ach, *nein! Bewahr!* Beware!" cried Fräulein, laughing so unrestrainedly her whole body shook. "Unashamed child!"

"There you are. How often have I told you that *Bewahr* should be translated 'Preserve us!' But you were so busy toiling to instruct me in German you never took the trouble to learn your English."

"Let us hope that is truth. And please just write upon my gravestone my name and these words," begged Fräulein Amalia solemnly: "'A poor teacher who now knows.'"

CHAPTER IV

AN ELIZABETHAN HOUSE

FRÄULEIN'S two hearers ceased from laughter and were silent a few moments.

Then in a changed voice Mrs. Wray inquired when was she to inspect the house, a treat she had been promised.

"Promised, indeed! When I begged and you did the promising," cried Peggy, briskly rising. "Let me fetch my key-basket and then we will explore every Bluebeard's closet and Mistletoe-Bough chest. I've only peeped in as yet; they were locked up till—a month ago, and I've been too busy—and really wanted your company, to take pleasure in a thorough *ransack*."

This was flattering, and Roma rose with zest to the great occasion. She discovered a genuine Morland in a gloomy room where cases of beetles and moths covered all but the darkest walls. Down a side passage hung a full set of original London Street cries. She broke the Tenth Commandment over the disregarded profusion of oak chests, fashioned in times when travelling journeymen repaid rest and lodging for some days by sound work on home-seasoned wood.

Lastly came a brilliant inspiration.

"You wanted an upstairs sitting-room, child. Why this big passage or landing is the original summer parlour

of your Elizabethan ancestors. See! it is directly above the big hall downstairs that was the winter parlour—and what a floor! Grand half-logs laid side by side, showing the identical split veining."

"So they do." The new owner dropped on her knees in delighted inspection. "It was only yesterday I ordered the ragged cocoanut matting to be dragged off that has tripped us up for years, and these boards got a scouring that must have surprised them. But," recovering the attitude ennobling humankind—"a parlour? With one staircase and five doors. It is our main passage, from wing to wing."

"Of course. Who cares? They didn't. One must suffer to live in the period. But wait—These *love-ly* casements look east and west, command opposite views, but still——" Roma sped like a comet through back bedrooms, with Peggy, so to speak, a lesser star tangled in her tail, dismayed by cranings out of windows and breathless calculations as to relative floor levels. At last the erratic luminary ceased her career, unfolded the mysterious reason of her visitation. A lower passage could be continued, corner closets and lesser cubby-holes of rooms utilized, with an outer short gallery added, of course, in proper Elizabethan style, and some steps raised—the house would be up-to-date. Maids would get about their work without scurrying through Peggy's restored "withdrawing-room," and there could be modern bathrooms and such-like household conveniences with "hot and cold laid on."

Roma ended breathless, sinking down in the future ideal apartment on a day-bed of Charles I. date, half piled with musty *Spectators* bound in original calf.

To the expert's mortification Peggy did not speak. Pink colour mounted in her cheeks as if someone had slapped them; faded. Her eyes stared out down the straight approach to the ball-topped gate-pillars again

revealed, thanks to her zeal ; her soft plump hands rubbed each other nervously. At last :

" It would be—perfect. Only—it would cost money."

" What doesn't ? Being born and buried ; and fed and clothed even in rags. All costs ; even in cowries as well as half-pence," was the immediate retort, impatient at so unexpected and unbelievable a lack of appreciation, not to mention overwhelming gladness.

" Yes : necessary expenses. But I do not feel myself in the position . . . to spend out of the superfluity of this estate on what . . . others to come after " (Peggy's throat convulsively worked)—" after me, may not approve. I am only a steward in charge ! "

" You are as obstinate and hard to convince by pure reason as all the Stewards or Stuarts of Scotland in a bunch." Roma felt heartily vexed. She added pithily : " This was all given to you. If you choose to make it a present to somebody else, pray what right or reason would that astonished individual have to reproach you with having used your own income whilst you were pleased to keep it ? "

Slowly the childlike features of Cowford's heiress cleared. She looked, standing there in the cross-lights of the wide latticed windows, such a slight, willowy slip of a girl, a black silhouette but for her pale, rose-tinted face and halo of warm-hued fair hair. Who could believe, wondered her elder, that there lay hidden under that mask so much determination, patient endurance since childhood, quixotic disregard of her elders' comfortable traditions, and grit ?

" Thank you, Auntie Roma. That has helped me. That seems right to me ! You know," linking an arm in that of her counsellor, " what is right to one mind may not be just quite to another. Isn't it so ? "

They descended to the hall or Elizabethan parlour whither Fräulein had ceremoniously invited Mrs. Wray

for a " Kaffee-Klatsch." She met the guest with outstretched hands, patted Peggy's shoulder and wore her best gown of black silk, besides a large mourning locket showing a weeping-willow of hair and a funeral urn. " Ach ! this is *gemüthlich* and homely ! *Nicht wahr ?* we will now only Deutsch speak."

Mrs. Wray was quite willing to keep her fluent German in practice. Peggy scoffed, remarking with unfailing candour, " All right, but you will see she will be first to break the rule. She loves picking pet words out of every language known to her. I call it salad-talk."

True enough after eight minutes, during which the others unfeignedly praised the aromatic coffee and whipped cream prepared by the hostess of the hour and the *kuchen* (she had braved the kitchen-jealousy by declaring, " Myself I will cook the cakes as we in Germany make them "), Amalia beamed on her guests, uttering :

" *Voilà ! Das ist herrlich !* Nice and comfortable. Nay, but " (this in her native tongue) " why dost thou smirk at me, teasing thy ages-old up-bringer, my Gretchen ? Backfisch that thou art ! What other tongues express ' voilà,' or ' nice,' or ' com*m*fortable,' or ' home ' ? Like our ' gemüthlich ' these are untranslateable, so we adopt them."

" Quite so. As you do Shakespeare," agreed Mrs. Wray. " Don't mind this flapper. You don't know the term ? Well—your ' backfisch.' It really ought to mean a young duck ; in Peggy's case a wild duck."

" When you have both finished rating me for my youth as if it were a fault you had both grown out of," said Peggy pertly, " perhaps you will cast your eyes round this hall. Is it at all a pleasant sitting-room : better than—lately —when everybody just left their sticks and umbrellas on the settle, and rushed through shivering ? "

" Pleasant ! It is transformed out of all knowing." Roma looked with more inner admiration than she cared

to betray at the genuinely old room with its high-carved fireplace where logs glowed on the hearth, the black beams, edged with mottoes, the buttery hatch, the deep window-seats, and massive oak tables now glowing with flowers brought in by Tom the new gardener with a good-will unrecorded in a generation of Cowford garden experience. Why had she instantly perceived the changes; guessed how Peggy had risen early and worked hard this morning to surprise her friend, and yet Roma, remaining seemingly remiss or indifferent, had wilfully kept silence? Because the elder was perplexed in mind. What hard cards to play for the child's good! Roma had cogitated all day at spare moments, wrinkling her forehead into an odd, furrowed square. If one seemed slighting to Cowford's attractiveness, Peggy, out of natural loyalty, would cling to it in secret all the more. So much the better, perhaps. But lavish praise? Might not that sway the girl's mind, troubled and fluctuating, into being ready to marry blindfold the man who could ensure her this home she loved, besides quieting once and for all her too, too sensitive conscience.

And what kind of a man might this Ralph Bowman be? It was a leap in the dark! Roma knew too well what a loveless marriage meant, wincing at her own past memories. She shrank with dread from such an ordeal in the future for this tender soul whose youth till now had been chill, grey and dreary enough to satisfy even those dark divinities whose awards are all named with the sad prefix *dis*. Far better become a nurse as Peggy prophesied of her fate. For Roma greatly feared, indeed was all but certain, the girl was steeling her mind to give up her fortune to this unknown cousin without any conditions rather than shilly-shally prolonging the misery of indecision, or lower maidenly dignity and reserve. Yes, far better than existence yoked to a fool, a fortune-hunter, a fop, a selfish, ill-tempered or miserly mate would

be the hard-worked days, the sleepless nights, of a sick-nurse, sometimes joyed by hard-won victory in the fight over a life, often weeping bitter tears into the hospital sink.

To escape from the dilemma at present Mrs. Wray rrelevantly exclaimed: "Do you still propose to repose n the Red Sea, Fräulein? Would it not be wiser to stop quietly here and look after Cowford. Or if Peggy means to shut up house entirely, you will really oblige me by staying at The Mount in my absence. Besides, two is company, you know, but *three* none. . . . Why do you both stare at me like that? . . . Well, of course I am going too. Yes: I mean to share in the flight of the flapper."

CHAPTER V

THE FLIGHT OF THE FLAPPER

SO it was settled.

Dozens of times Mrs. Wray had been half strangled by Peggy's unforeseen embraces. As often Fräulein Maier raised clasped hands of gratitude to sky or ceiling, reiterating, "*Nein!* How is it possible; and how indeed is anything not possible?"

It was mid-January, and, as Roma declared, there was no time to lose. She knew her India, having been born, spent much of her infancy and been married there (widowed was understood). So she hustled Peggy, bustled her own affairs—then suddenly cried a Halt.

"I've a new idea. Why not spend the summer in Kashmir? There's no sense in wasting our two-years-available tickets on a dine-and-sleep visit to India. And I have always wanted to see the Happy Valley."

"Oh, *let's!*" cried Peggy, shining-eyed. A few seconds later her face changed: she sighed. "Only the—the expense. You go. I can return with some missionary, very likely."

"What nonsense! I'll lend you enough. No, let me give you the trip. It will cost far less than the birthday present I was meaning to get you. Why, my mother went often and took Pollyann, who says one can live on eight pounds a month at a pinch, while twelve is wild extravagance."

"How splendid! Then I'll go—we'll go! I'm not a pauper, for there is my mother's money, two hundred and forty a year that is my very own. Uncle used to pay Fräulein's salary and my frocks out of it, but there was always some over, and that is quite a respectable balance at the bank."

"First rate. But what about your uncle's personal savings that must have accumulated to any amount? What?—not yours! You dear goose-girl, if this interloping Ralph Bowman does not refuse to touch a penny of that hoard he will be a cross between a swine dog and a camel. By the way, you are certain he is quartered at Secunderabad?"

"Not exactly. I hunted him out in the Army List. His regiment, the Fifty-fifth Cavalry, is there. He himself is put down as adjutant at Dustipore, which is confusing."

"Dustipore. You don't say so. Why, it's a native state, and the very place. . . . Wait." Roma darted across the room, for this talk took place at The Mount, whisked open a bureau, routed out a Christmas card of elephants and banyan trees, then sky-rocketed back triumphantly. "This is it—Dustipore. With the Raymonds' love; such dears. They will put us up, or I'll eat your bugle hat. He is Resident there."

"A resident magistrate," commented the insular damsel to Roma's amusement, who wickedly laid by the joke to be produced in due time at the Residency dinner-table. "And now about an outfit. I wrote to two ladies' papers for advice, and here are cuttings of the answers."

With innocent pride in her own foresight, pretty Peggy waved her trophies aloft by way of counterblast to the Indian card.

"Listen! Lady Ermyntrude in the *Dame's Delight* writes: 'On no account take out any fine underwear, for Indian dhobies, as Mark Twain wrote, are famous for

trying to split a stone with a shirt. Quite old skirts will do nicely for shipboard, with dark flannel blouses not to show being soiled, and a tie. Take a tam-o'-shanter cap for the voyage. But a cork helmet with a blue or green veil is indispensable on land, even at garden parties.' . . . What is the matter ? "

For Roma Wray was quaking suspiciously with her face buried in her hands, only responding by a stifled, "Go on. DO."

"'Strong boots will prove a safeguard against snakes and centipedes,'" pursued Peggy unsteadily, with undermined confidence. "'Turning our attention to evening finery a black silk skirt is always appropriate and need not be new, as it shows so little if set off by a dainty blouse (see our paper patterns) of washing muslin, of which three or four run up easily at home should suffice.'— What are you laughing at ? "

For her older friend now fairly gave way to mirth, peal after peal of melodious laughter so infecting the listener that for pure comradeship she joined in also.

" Hearken to me, winsome child of plough and pastures. Have I, or have I not, an atom of taste in dress according to your unskilled yet unprejudiced opinion."

Thus Roma apostrophized her pupil ; with conscious worth accepting Peggy's ardent assurances that everybody in the country round agreed there was nobody in the world who invariably wore such utterly appropriate, often thrilling clothes, as her darling mentor. Why, at Fordtown there was a general rush on the part of all its feminine dwellers to peep under the blinds when the Mount carriage rolled by, to " see the latest " on Mrs. Wray's shapely figure. And the graceless girl giggled, recalling how at market-town tea-parties it was hard work to look serious overhearing the discussions of the guests on the cut and fit of these new fashions. Withered faces with grey hairs scratched back into knots of a

severity unattainable by any other nationality on earth, seemed galvanized into animation. How their poor faintly-moustached mouths worked, that looked like so many tired bags wanting a drawing-string.

Well ! it may be little, but still it is something to afford them that much interest, reflected Mrs. Wray seriously. Whereupon she gave her judgment on the weighty question, thus :

" Not too much of anything : the best of everything. Some society women bring out thirty trunks, each the size of an *almarah* (that's a wardrobe), and go home with half unopened. To London posthaste, then Paris—even Tennyson wrote no maiden should believe she looks better in an old gown than a new."

" I'll do just exactly as you advise," promised the disciple faithfully ; which was satisfactory, seeing Roma knew in life that most friends ask advice, then do just the contrary, ending up by telling their neighbours how much their own ideas surpassed the rather stupid counsel of dear Mrs. Wray.

" Then I don't suppose that this out of *Teapot Twaddle* will interest you ; it's Godmother Prue's advice about —well—necessaries for Indian travel." The speaker looked humbly worried. Her monitress was brilliant in great things, but would she, could she stoop to the domestic details in which Peg knew herself to be a notable young housekeeper ? " It's about—railway comforts."

" But why not ? I love comforts and adore luxuries. Say on."

" ' Of course you must take a light mattress, besides blankets and all household linen and pillows,' " read Peggy, pretty sure that was undeniably sound. " ' Also a portable bath, a small medicine chest, large lunch and tea baskets, lots of books on India. Above all a good supply of tinned provisions, biscuits, cocoa, preserved milk, etc.' "

" What ? She has forgotten a refrigerator, a machine

for making soda water in the Bombay mail, and a gramophone for dull days." Roma shook her head over Godmother Prue's forgetfulness so severely that her young comrade guessed a trap. Next moment Mrs. Wray's slyness was choked by irrepressible glee.

"Baths—in India! And—and—and——Oh, Pegtop! wait till you have been out there a week—a day, and how you will laugh!"

Recovering herself and in matter-of-fact seriousness, Roma explained, advised, then ended: "Can you use a revolver? No? Well, I've got two—we had them in India, and you had better take one. Sprot" (her gamekeeper) "shall teach you how to shoot. Can I——? You simple child, I've won many a prize at ladies' matches."

Thus all was settled, and in due course carried out. Fräulein Maier waved a large linen handkerchief until Roma's motor whirred round the far corner, whilst repeating to herself with decreasing energy, "*Nein!* But how is it possible, and how is it not possible?"

CHAPTER VI

IN THE RED SEA

"THE moon on this Arabian coast is twice, thrice, *five* times bigger than at home," announced Peggy as she looked over a darkened sea somewhere in the direction of Mount Sinai in that exquisite Eastern hour of fading afterglow.

"The astronomer johnnies at Greenwich might not agree with you. But I do," Bobby Bowles gallantly made reply, leaning his elbows on the ship's rail by her side. He likewise sat beside Miss Lee at meals, having spent some of his slender subaltern's coin in inducing the Scotch steward to aid this manœuvre.

"Seeing is believing! It looks so to me—therefore to me it is," uttered the damsel dogmatically, whilst a moon huge and white, as if it were a cardboard poster, rose, nay, shot upwards with a swiftness unknown surely in any other quarter of earth.

Ten minutes more they two stood there enchanted by the soft air, warm since they passed Suez, yet fresh, both pleasurably aware of kindred youth, good looks and understanding.

Then the girl roused herself. "I must fly and look in to my aunt's cabin before I dress for dinner. No, it is not sea-sickness, though she suffered dreadfully in that rough weather before Port Said; but there she got

influenza. Poor dear, she struggled up to go on shore and show me the Japanese shops and have real *land-tea*. But the waves jobbled so she got splashed and took a bad chill."

"Did you see our Salvation Army party that are coming out to India? They went ashore too, and one of the lassies was praying on her knees while their boat was tossing a little to be saved from the perils of the deep. I bet the colonel here" (he looked at a figure two yards off) "a hundred to one she would be heard," said Bobby Bowles irreverently. He was fresh from Sandhurst. The colonel, a spare, active man, smiled, but answered gravely: "I greatly respect Salvationists. They do a lot of good."

As Peggy lightly ran below and called past a cabin-curtain, Roma's voice sounded weakly from within. "Is that you, dear child? Yes, I'm going on well, but do be careful of infection. Stand well in the draught outside, much as I love to see you. . . . Well? any news?"

Invariable shipboard question, having no thought of Marconigrams, merely of monotonous life on board.

Peggy narrated in a projected whisper, glancing down the side-alley to assure herself of absent neighbours: "Just the usual games; but they're great fun. My partner at deck quoits is a Colonel Auldjo, who sits beyond your empty place at dinner. He is awfully kind and taught me how to play. Of course he is quite old."

"But you said he was in command of an Indian cavalry regiment, according to your Mr. Bowles. He can't be too decrepit for quoits. What is he like?"

"He is grey all over his head; not white or silvery, but a deep mourning grey, rather becoming I must own," explained Peggy truthfully. "Then he looks as if he fed on nuts and steel-drops, and could be twisted into knots without breaking. Mr. Bowles admires him prodigiously, and says he must ride quite a light weight and be as

hard as nails. He has rather kind eyes, I must admit. Every morning and evening he leans across your empty seat and inquires how my aunt is. It was then I noticed them. But one side of his face is spoilt by a scar. Mr. Bowles called it a seam badly sewn, but I told him it was a gusset, and we both laughed."

Every word of which description, falling on ears then blank of other matter, the invalid was destined to remember later.

"Then he is not one of the jolly-old-boy colonels who joke with the girls and tell good stories."

"Not he. He sits brooding like your gamekeeper's tame hawk on its perch and never utters at table unless when that very handsome woman opposite me looks honey and talks sugar across to him. Darling, I'm not sure that I like her, though she calls me 'little pal.'"

"Really. You admired her golden hair, and told me her complexion was like a waxen bust."

"I am bored so stiff with agonising these two nights at her bridge-table," came in a mournful sigh. "You know I've only played with you and the rector and Fräulein for love. The first night I told you my partner and I won heaps. He was that Persian merchant who sits beside her. (How she *can* smile sweetly at his boasts of getting rich buying hides!) And he actually said he was English naturalised—at that Mr. Bowles burst out: 'How long?' The merchant scowled and said, 'One year since.'"

Peggy drew breath and returned from this divagation to her card troubles. "The Persian was all over oily smiles, for my cards were simply splendid, but the fair dame looked dark, and once when the Persian jumped on her crying out she had revoked, she turned black. In the end she gave me a crooked grimace and said, 'Little girls generally have beginner's luck,' which made me mad angry. Well, last night she insisted her husband must play with

me ; he is a red-faced, good-humoured Mr. Crundles, and she calls him 'Billy dear.' He said he hated playing with women and being dragged from the smoking saloon, but to his credit he does all she asks him. . . . Where was I ? . . . Oh, and she—yes, I suppose her name *is* Crundles, as you say. . . . Well, she made just lovely eyes at the colonel during dessert across the table, entreating as a great, great kindness that he would make a fourth—for the Persian is out of favour since the revoke business. And Colonel Auldjo is such a gentleman he bowed politely, saying, 'If you wish it so much, certainly,' but Mr. Bowles and I were in fits, for he stiffened, as Mr. Bowles said, till he looked exactly a poker without the warmth. Then later on, what do you think ? This morning I was too annoyed to tell you."

"You lost all your winnings and more, my Peg. The usual experience of the tyro."

"Worse than that. The colonel came up to me on deck when I was alone a minute and said rather nicely how sorry he was at my losing, then he hemmed and looked uncomfortable and went on quite low that there had been a mistake last night which apparently neither my partner nor I noticed. His partner either revoked again—or something—he didn't say. Only that he did not like to tell her or Mr. Crundles, but would I accept back my money, because he felt he could not possibly keep it."

"How odd. And what did you do ? " in curiosity as to how one so inexperienced conducted herself in so new a situation.

"Of course I stood on my dignity and asked him to put the money in next Sunday's collection. Besides, I told him that if a woman of his partner's age could not play without making these mistakes, she ought to be told, and that if even a Persian could tell her so a British officer surely might be brave enough."

"Oh, Mar-gar-et!" in an aghast tone.

"Well—I did!" defiantly. Then craning well into the cabin, with a crimsoning face and in a whisper of piercing bitterness: "To tell the whole truth (which I always do with you in the end, though sometimes it is hateful), Colonel Auldjo began this confession by sitting down beside me in Mr. Bowles' empty chair and asking in a grandfatherly manner, as if coaxing an infant to swallow castor oil, did I not feel rather young to play bridge for money with my elders—*and—did my aunt approve of it?*"

Peggy gasped with anger. Roma made an uneasy sound. A third person sniffed with common manners but uncommon emphasis. She was disregarded *pro tem.*; for, of course, the sniffer was feminine, considering the place.

"That had so riled me, you see, speaking as if I were a child, that, besides telling him I nearly always asked your advice and generally took it, I simply had to get even with the gentleman again."

"And he——?"

"Oh, he got out of it in a rather grand manner. (If he had gone on doing the condescending elder person, it would have been worse.) He gave a sort of courtier bow and replied that if unfortunately for the world I had been born a man, I would know there were some things no officer who was a gentleman could do. This happened to be one of—— My goodness! the dinner-bugle!"

A hurried scamper to the adjoining cabin ended the recital.

A third voice now uplifted itself harshly. "In my opinion, mam, that colonel is a real sahib; I've picked him out on deck. As to young Mister, or Master Bowles, he's just a nice lad. Only him and Miss Peggy had no call to be sitting all afternoon yesterday on the windy side of the deck where nobody else would go, with nothing

to look at but a canvas screen before the pair of their noses. The second officer fixed that to please Miss Peggy. He admires her, too. I had my eye on him."

Do not judge the speaker harshly. Pollyann was the daughter of a Scotch serjeant, had been nursemaid to a Missee Baba Roma in India, married a faithless corporal, soon a deserter to both the service and his partner; then became maid to Miss Roma grown up. Later, during her mistress's married life, a seven years' span, there was hardly one out of the many trying, sorrowful, even cruel incidents of that time of ordeal that was not known to this most faithful of waiting women, none that she did not guess at. Pollyann at rare times remarked grimly that there was no call to tell her things. She knew life. Which was true. No one ever heard her complain.

"I am always glad you do tell me everything, Pollyann. But it seems time I was up on deck myself"—here came a fit of coughing, followed by soothing pillow-adjusting and a dose of medicine.

The interlude passed, Pollyann began without preamble: "As to that golden-haired lady, she had one cheek rouged more nor the other (it's dark to make up in these cabins). And she's not Mrs. Crundles neither, though Miss Lee has *his* name pat enough. I cast my eye on her cabin door, which has wrote up large as life: 'The Honourable Mrs. Mark Blackadder.'"

"*What?* . . . Why, I know her. Lily Brown she used to be, and she was a big girl just leaving school when I was the youngest sent there at six years old. . . . I saw her marriage years after in the papers, when I was fifteen or so. And then, when I came out in Calcutta, she was there for one season. Captain Blackadder was in a Dragoon Guards regiment. Afterwards he left and took to tea-planting."

Memories came back vaguely of 'stories' about the Blackadders. Of extravagance and a threatened 'smash-

up caused mostly, said unkind gossip, by the expenditure of the lady, who was not satisfied with being an acknowledged society beauty, but insisted on her docile husband swimming their earthen vessel among a fleet of iron-plated Dreadnoughts.

"She has an ayah with a tongue too lightly hung in her head," went on Pollyann's dour voice, "and the creature was letting on more than she should to a steward, about her master who stayed on the tea estate whilst his partner, the fat sahib, took the memsahib to England and back. The pair of them were low-minded like most of their class, and they never supposed I understood their Hindustani."

"Pollyann—I'm going to sleep now. Remember, I'm going on deck to-morrow."

CHAPTER VII

A FIRST FLIRTATION

THAT evening a happy young couple sat under the stars on a deserted deck, conversing with deep interest, sometimes of their past trials or joys at home or school, or with innocent mirth at having escaped from all "the rest."

At dessert Bobby fairly bolted when Goldilocks, as Peggy termed her *vis-à-vis*, began to recruit for nightly bridge, whilst Peg, untrained in polite evasion, reddened on being claimed as a fixture, stiffly announcing that her aunt did not like her to play cards. Both had blundered, knew offence was taken and now giggled in mutual exoneration. "At our age we don't want to play with our grandparents," they vaguely agreed. "Oh, what a jolly hour we have had," was their reluctant last word when propriety occurred to Peggy.

The ship belonged to one of the lesser lines and carried few passengers in February, these—mostly and notably Mrs. Blackadder—declaring that not cheapness but merely a convenient sailing date was the cause of their patronage. Otherwise a P. and O. ship would of course have seen them—the speakers invariably agreeing in undertones that all fellow-passengers not within earshot were "such a mixed lot."

As the boy and girl entered a kind of outer saloon

encircling the stairs they came full upon a small crowd engaged in opposite corners. Colonel Auldjo sat immersed in a book, whilst near him Mrs. Blackadder with somewhat forced graciousness was teaching the latest "patience" to the Persian and a Jew who was travelling agent for a jeweller's firm, and whom only yesterday she scornfully termed "impossible." Beyond, a group of commonplace girls, harmless and good-humoured, but fastidiously circumvented by Peggy in general, kept up a popping fusillade of mirth over coon-can.

Was it mere ill-luck that planted Mrs. Blackadder where her late "little pal" must needs pass? At any rate she looked up, stopped when pouncing on an ace, and raising pencilled eyebrows, remarked in gentle surprise:

"Why, it's Miss Lee! Out so late? What a convenient aunt you must have who does not disapprove of your risking a cold. But I see, Mr. Bowles was looking after you, so"—with a flattering glance from still beautiful eyes at blushing Bobby—"one can easily imagine you have enjoyed yourself. *Ah!* moonlight and stars, and *ces beaux jours passés*. We older persons have also known them, eh, Colonel Auldjo?"

The latter individual had closed his book and risen at the moment of his interlocutor's onslaught on Peggy. In a bewildered manner the girl thought him like a sentinel roused to the alert.

"Hem!" he responded, standing very upright and stroking his moustache as if dispassionately considering a proposition, whilst steadily looking back at the brown eyes with golden specks upraised with a lurking *what* in their regard? Challenge? appeal? a something that suggested understanding. And yet they two appeared to be mere ship acquaintances. Then Auldjo actually smiled as if faintly amused.

"We did; though I don't give in to mixed day and

moonlight. What a silly old game it was! And yet what a lot we thought of it in our green salad time."

Peggy escaped like a triumphing mouse, though descending with an impression of smothered giggles from the coon-canners. The Jew and the Persian were uneasily suspicious that their siren's address to this outstanding soldier sounded as the call of kind to kind. But Mrs. Blackadder's eyes, half-veiled by white lids, were turned on Bobby now; her seductive notes moved him as she made room on the sofa by her side.

"You are not obliged to obey auntie. You are not going so early to bed, too," she purred, with playfullest malice yet subtle flattery of glance that had been many a wiser man's undoing. So Bobby, blushing furiously again, succumbed; envied by the Orientals.

Alas! for the how many millionth time has it been said that man's inconstancy is his most constant trait. Next morning when Mrs. Wray made her first appearance no Bobby Bowles was at hand to be shown off as Peggy's nice lamb. The youngster had overslept himself for breakfast. And only (this was Peggy's mortified private thought!), only Colonel Auldjo played up as second-best, congratulated the recovering invalid, carried cushions and moved her deck-chair to the most sheltered spot. Roma was grateful; then her book, upon which she felt too languid to fix her attention—a newly-published, long-expected biography—roused his curiosity. She offered its loan, whereupon they slid into a discussion on serious literature. Peggy, after dutiful attendance, presently slipped away. It was the hour when she and her swain were wont to meet at a certain spot. It was empty.

Wandering round the deck, could she believe her eyes? Bobby Bowles was seated on the spare chair beside Mrs. Blackadder's cane lounge, which she carefully reserved for her novels or Mr. Crundles. And that hateful

woman, reclining in graceful pose, was pretending to read his fortune while actually holding his hand. Peg managed to pass by them, her head high, but she breathed hard afterwards.

All morning, all afternoon Bowles remained invisibly tethered to the cane lounge; at meals Mrs. Blackadder spoke across continually to him—and with gentlest show of her pussy claws gave Peggy a playful scratch or two, pointedly showing she bore little mouse no malice.

"You have got a cough, Miss Lee. Ah! what did I tell you last night? It is dangerous to stay out late on deck so early in the season."

The victim felt as if disbelieving her eyes and ears. Next day and some more to follow a violent cold confined poor Peggy to bed, and in turn Roma pitied and sat by the sufferer while Pollyann nursed them both.

On Peggy's reappearance after Aden was passed, Bobby Bowles cheerfully came up to inquire how she felt. Rotten luck she could not play in the games! Smiling, he sat down as of old, and, tempted irresistibly, our inexperienced heroine attempted a mild pleasantry: "How have you been getting on with the ancestors? Last time I saw you, you were quite on speaking terms with Our Waxworks."

"Look here," blurted out Bobby. "I'd better tell you we were quite wrong about her. She's—well, she's an angel of a woman. I never in all my life found anyone who so perfectly understood me"—he looked deep things. "If you don't mind my saying so, I'd rather not hear jokes at her expense."

"It was your joke," fired up Peggy. "How was I to know you have suddenly changed so tremendously? You called her a Has-been. It was I who said honestly she was handsome."

"Beautiful," corrected Bobby with a sigh. "If I really was such a fool, I'm sorry. And"—with a

maddeningly knowing smile—"I myself like to talk to women who know life, who know the world."

"At her age she might," curtly observed Miss Lee.

"She is only about thirty; she told me so," brusquely declared Bowles. Then in grave, regretful reproof, "D'you know, you seem a bit jealous."

Jealous! Eighteen summers jealous—of—of nearly or quite forty. Not that our heroine's inner storm broke in those words. Lightnings blazed first.

But at the first flash Bobby bounded from his seat, grinning a supercilious smile.

"Crundles!" he called, "wait a mo—I'll come for a turn with you." So the fresh subaltern walked off with the red-faced tea-planter, who, clad for the warm weather in spotless but shrunken flannels, resembled a strutting white turkey cock, if anyone has ever seen that rare gobbler.

"Well! That is the limit!" breathed the furious fair, watching her faithless squire's retreat. Never, never more would she believe in man or men again! All she had read, heard, scoffed at in youthful superior wisdom rushed in a flood of bitterness to her mind. Its waters whelmed her. Now she knew. Then Roma, who was resting near—could she have heard? yet, she showed no least sign—spoke presently in a tone of restrained affection.

"You are hardly strong enough to sit up at dinner to-night. Would you like a tray on deck with Pollyann to keep you company? Later on, as it is so warm now, you could stay well wrapped up on the sheltered side. I have been sitting there these two nights, and the second officer—by the way, he asks always after you—has been telling us stories. He promised to keep one of his best for you."

"Thank you. Yes; that would be better than the stuffy saloon. But who is *us?*" came in outwardly

indifferent acceptance through which showed inner relief.

"Oh—various old fogies," smiled Roma. "Colonel Auldjo for one, and the delightful Italian missionary besides a clever doctor woman."

That night accordingly when a pale-faced Peggy was helped carefully through the outer saloon and down-stairs on Colonel Auldjo's arm, with a devoted Roma hovering by her side and an assiduous second officer bearing rugs and cushions, she could smile at the bridge-party, who all looked up. Bobby had the grace to give merely one glance, then frowned at his hand. "Had Miss Lee ventured outside again; and enjoyed herself?" inquired the Waxworks in dulcet tones.

"Ever so much," replied Miss Lee in apt imitation. "We have had simply thrilling stories. There was one the second officer has been telling us you really ought to hear."

And indeed it seems a pity that the yarn in question should not be here set down. So it follows.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PASSENGER'S BEEFSTEAK

THE group of passengers who loved fresh air after dinner instead of electric lights and card tables were lounging on deck in the tropical darkness. Coming soft-footed among them the second officer showed ghost-like in his white ducks.

"What's going on?" he asked, dropping into a deck chair beside pretty Miss Lee that chanced (of course it was pure chance) to be vacant.

Said someone with vivacity—by the way, it happened to be Mrs. Wray:

"As it's too hot for roasting chestnuts, we're exchanging biscuits; you understand?—twice cooked tales. But now you are come, do spin us a yarn."

And various voices chimed in: "Yes, yes. A story of some queer thing that happened at sea."

"A ship captain's biscuit, eh?" chuckled the second officer. Then after some moments of comfortable musing, "Well, there's one tale I may have cooked and redevilled more than twice, but it's pretty tough stuff still. Here goes!"

"When I was some years back on board a New Zealand liner, bound for Buenos Aires, what between foul weather and fogs we were out of our course a bit. What was worse, we were out of fresh grub.

"After rounding Cape Horn it was that the crew grew fed up with salt pork day after dull day and weevils in the mouldy biscuit. But the poor devil who minded t most was our only passenger.

"'Pig's meat in brine and cockroaches in the rest of the muck,' he used to grumble at meals, turning over the food with his fork, and making grimaces of disgust.

"At last, though only fourth officer, I spoke up: 'Why don't you leave it?'

"He looked at me; got up, and walked away without touching a morsel. Then, I remember, the doctor reproached me.

"'Can't you see the poor chap is booked for a longer voyage soon? His friends only persuaded him on board to be rid of him. Let's hope he'll last out this trip. But with no fresh food he's bound to weaken.'

"Next morning the purser sang out to me: 'Hi! lad. Jolly good news. On account of our passenger, I've rummaged out the stores and come across a tin of beefsteak. *Beefsteak*, man alive! Smell it frizzling in the galley now.'

"Smell it I did. The most delicious, appetizing aroma that ever rose to a hungry man's nostrils. As we both sniffed, the doctor with the steward came out of the passenger's cabin and—they locked the door. 'As bad as that?' asked the purser softly, while I wondered.

"The doctor nodded gravely. 'Been up with him all night. He went half an hour ago. Well, well; it was doubtful whether we'd have kept him as far as the La Plata. . . . Hey? What's *that?*' In turn he and the steward stood scenting the steak; then muttered to each other regretfully, 'What a pity!' 'Ay! How *he'd* have enjoyed it!'

"Of course it was a pretty sad event. Still, presently all we officers sat down to that glorious beefsteak

with suppressed eagerness. Then just as the captain was helped first, I saw him look round with a start, while his jaw fell and his eyes rolled.

"*The passenger was walking into the saloon and he sat down at his usual place.*

"Deadly pale he looked, I must say, and never spoke; but otherwise there seemed nothing amiss with him.

"The steward's hand shook as he carved, and the gravy splashed. But, as we all looked at each other, the first officer seized the next plate of beefsteak and shoved it before our guest. Then we all watched, mute.

"Slowly but steadily the supposed dead man ate, not exactly showing relish, yet finishing every vestige of the meat, down to sopping up the gravy with a bit of bread. As to us——!

"Well, not a man dared to ply knife or fork. We made a kind of pretence, at least I did; but furtively we watched, breathless, till the passenger rose and without a word went noiselessly out.

"At that the captain and doctor looked at each other, and followed. We others crowded the alley-way as they tried the passenger's door, unlocked it and entered.

"There stark and still lay a shrouded form in the bunk. The doctor bent over it; drew down the sheet; examined—then returned outside. 'Dead as Julius Cæsar!'

"That's the end of my yarn, ladies and gentlemen."

There followed a silence on deck. The captain's biscuit had proved hard to digest. But soon the listeners burst out in many-voiced dispute.

Alone Peggy boldly whispered to the second officer: "Tell me! what truth is there in it?"

Quietly the narrator answered, "Not one word."

CHAPTER IX

IN AN INDIAN BUNGALOW

ONE hundred and five in the shade and still early morning. The long but narrow central room of the small bungalow was too lofty for its width, the ventilators aloft suggesting a gallery. Its occupants were vaguely conscious of its architectural disproportion among other jarring notes, in spite of compensating leathern sofas, deep chairs, many books, and tables laden with brass curios. Overhead a white muslin beflounced punkah slowly flapped, making old-fashioned folk think of ballet skirts in the past mid-century.

Peggy Lee, wearing a low-necked, short-sleeved cotton frock, gasped from a cane chair. "Well! This is the limit!"

"What now?" asked Roma. "Last time you used that up-to-date expression was when Mr. Bobby Bowles bolted."

"Pooh—that chubby boy! Ages ago! That was nearly the end of Ferbuary and this is the first week of May. I am simply centuries older now—is not that a fact, dear?"

You are either a *blasée* baby or graduated in worldliness at the pace of the most ill-growing weed," replied a heat-proof elder with annoying coolness. "Belle of Secunderabad. The Blush-rose of Poona who refused

two excellent proposals in one fortnight; evaded half a dozen more. Heartless flirt!"

"Why that name for my magnanimity in sparing unnecessary mortification, when I might have pulled a tail feather from each victim and worn it in my cap? Those two were making a motor race of it at sixty miles an hour and wouldn't look out for, 'This corner is dangerous.' In any case, with twenty girls to two hundred and fifty eligible men, proposals are no great compliment."

Then in resignation to an impending Damocles' sword, "Besides, don't forget I cannot consider myself free."

"Forget our wild-goose chase to Secunderabad, only to find your Cowford Army List must have been three years old and the Fifty-fifth Cavalry were gone, only leaving behind them the tradition that all the subs. who joined the regiment arrived with a wife, baby and peram-bulator."

"Excepting my—supplanter, the adjutant at Dustipore. And by the way," in a small voice—*Yap! Yow! Bow-wow-wow!* Four broken-haired terriers, two Airedale puppies and an Irishman sprang from their respective sofas in the verandah in ear-splitting chase of a wretched pi-dog.

"And all we learned of him is that he left before the Raymonds came to the Residency, when plague made a shuffle and new deal of the few Europeans in the state. The Maharajah did say he was a good shikaree and a great bahadur because your cousin went with him on foot after tigers. But that Anglo-Indian cat at Poona, who pretended to know everyone ever mentioned, well——"

"That asp! Oh, she was too, too poisonous! To say he flirted with the lady missionaries and used to sit on the dusty road with three or four of them, playing a banjo to draw the natives, who were scandalised at a

Feringhee having so many wives. Who would believe a word said by a woman with a face like a smoked ham ? "

Peggy's indignation melted to moisture, and her last remaining vigour was expended on a call intended to penetrate past curtains hiding her bedroom door that opened from the hall sitting-room : " *Qui hai ?* Elizabeth, my fan, my big fan." Then in sudden drop of tone and face, " But I was going to tell you——"

Interruption came again. This time it took the shape of a black-footed human mushroom, who silently handed a palmetto fire-screen. He was Roma's bearer, a middle-aged " boy " from Ooticamund, with a face resembling a dark bird with short bill and remarkably bright eyes. Clad in a European suit of white cotton, his turban, still whiter, bulged with dignity.

If ever a bird can be said to sneer, then this spectacle was seen as Peggy said, " You, Veraswami ? Thanks ! But where is my ayah ? "

" Got headache, mum, I tell her take pill. She not knowing fan : looking, looking—I find."

Excited chatter came from within, pure Hindustani to the unsuspicious ear of the young mistress. Roma frowned.

" What is she saying ? " unwisely pursued Peggy to the bearer.

" Sauce."

Veraswami stood in an attitude of elegant respect. Excuse the adjective, but none other expresses his slender person and jauntily refined air set off by a gold-banded puggaree, carbuncle earrings and a silver ring on his index left toe. It was regrettable that close inspection betrayed white bristles on his close-shaven chin. Otherwise the " boy " might well pass for thirty-odd instead of nearer fifty years of age.

" What is Memsahib Pollyann doing ? " inquired Mrs. Wray.

"Notting now. She trying pack. I tell her 'No good, too hot'; she drip, drip. I pack everyting, pack very good. Leave all to me." Gently Modesty incarnate was gliding away.

"Stay. What about the ekkas to take our heavy luggage from here (Rawal Pindi) into Kashmir? Will you find out the price?"

"Done gone, mum. Made *banderbast* this morning six o'clock. What price missis said too much." He disappeared.

Roma laughed. Next, not noting a finest thread of plaintive appeal in her companion's limp query: "What are those handbills?"

"Touting papers from Srinagar. Please realise that we expect to enter the Happy Valley in a few days. But how?—help me to decide. Four days by tonga, that Philip says reduces him to pulp—and he is tough enough. Or—listen to Ahamdu Lall."

"'Landou erdered which will make its journey to Srinagar 5—6 days. Rs. 5 will be charged for the day will be spent over 6 days on the road.'"

"How long shall we loiter, do you think? . . . Oh! and if the driver takes us over the khud, Ahamdu Lall 'will not be responsible for any demage of property hereby from and cause whatever.'"

Roma wrinkled her delicate brows as if forming square to repel outer distractions whilst calculating the difference between a quicker conveyance and fewer dak bungalows, or the contrary.

She was not really many minutes over it, yet Peggy meantime was up and away, travelling hundreds and hundreds of miles. What magic carpet ever equalled Thought? Peggy saw a far-surrounding twilight Arabian sea, heaving under a slight monsoon. Next a landing at Bombay in blinding sun-glare, while around, crowds of bullock-horns were her first impression—long, curved,

back-slanting ; some painted, silvered ; then crowds of slender dark-faced folk in fascinating vivid colours, canary, lettuce green, raspberry, rose, geranium.

Once more the invading horde of ship passengers melted away in the vast coolness of the Taj hotel. Night came with swiftly falling darkness, and they were dining on the Yacht Club lawn, by electric light mingling with starlight, whilst flying foxes passed eerily overhead, a band played, sea breezes blew softly, gay groups around made merry, and Colonel Auldjo, if a trifle dignified, was the most courteous of hosts. Next morning he unbent when, at his suggestion, they drove through the fresh-watered wide streets very early to see the great market with its long covered alleys of strange vegetables, glowing flowers, and brilliant cage-birds. Skimming over the hot, long day's shopping, now they entered the night mail, where their newly-engaged dark-faced servants were busily making up beds. On the platform, giving them the send-off of last kindly attentions and good-wishes called through the window, still stood the upright, spare soldier's figure of their new—well, one might, really must, call Colonel Auldjo, friend.

With dawn, again Peggy felt herself waking to pull up the blind, eagerly looking out. How new the width, space, clear light. Now memory's vision sped past drought-parched plain stretching to the horizon, miles of sprouting green barley, taller maize ; again rivers meandering through white sands, wallowing cattle and groups of natives washing. Evening brought a wilder land, with lakes, called tanks, of vivid blue, and rocks thrown, strewn, piled over the land in cairns, kopjes, loggan stones. That was Hyderabad.

Whisk ! The scenes changed to a country of crumpled brown paper, arid, " 'orrid," as the vulgar tourist described *H*andalusia. Dustipore deserved its name in spite of a Residency, where Peggy's fresh memory was impressed

for life by her first acquaintance with a saluting guard; ever-ready chaprassies; a garden glorious with huge trees mantled in snowy beaumontia, purple bougainvillea, or blue selenum; mighty crimson-flowered cotton-trees and flame of the forest in blossom; lawns where peacocks danced at night under the palms.

Yes, it was a charming page of their journey, though brief, because the Raymonds were just starting to Poona for a three weeks' round of gaieties in which our travellers shared, housed by some of Roma's many distant relations, who, though hitherto mutually unknown except by hearsay, welcomed her and "pretty Miss Lee" as they might their nearest and dearest.

So in early April away down the green ghauts and to Bombay, staying with a married school-friend of Roma's in a bungalow overlooking the sea and golden blazing sunsets; a spot where palms, evening breezes and leafy lanes were wedded to reminiscences of little dinners and early jackal-hunts.

Peggy rode fearlessly, ignorantly but by no means badly, despite rawness; Roma, Indian reared, had been cradled in the saddle. A moonlight dance on the drugget-covered Byculla tennis court almost caused a breach in Peggy's heart fortress. *He* wore such distractingly pointed black moustaches above gleaming teeth and knew how to whisper so seductively in shadowed sitting-out corners. Then Roma's school-friend's husband ruthlessly drawled: "How is your wife at home, and the kiddy?" The brief dream dissolved.

Northwards now by Ahmedabad's many mosques; Ajmere's dry lake rippling with lucerne and set round with snowy marble terraces and pavilions where Shah Jehan once reposed; its gaudily interesting Dargah where holy tombs bask in glitter and pilgrim processions behind stone-cut veils of lace work; its venerably beautiful and solitary brown "hut," that famous mosque

said to have been built in two and a half days. What an Arabian Nights town is compressed behind those ancient high walls and strong gateways. Strange contrast with Mayo College, stately palace of learning presiding like the Empire mother among the houses of its royal sons in the wide park where groups of well-grown lads play polo or cricket, each an Indian princeling. Jaipur slid by like a stage scene of raspberry-hued buildings, their fronts cream-traceried. Udaipur, that milk-white dream-city, appeared mirrored in its lovely lake, palace-islets studding the water surface.

But what, of all sights, could surpass then or ever henceforth in life the first glimpse of a miraculous snowy bubble poised in a sunset sky ?—so beauteous, irradiated as by an unearthly subtly-changing light in the golden peace and crimson afterglow, it might have been a mirage about to vanish.

From childhood Peggy, having read, was wont to dream of this supreme dome. Even more ardently Roma's romantic soul yearned towards it through her Indian youth as to her heart's Mecca ; the longing to behold it never yet granted, ever made her conscious of an unfulfilled desire. Driving hither past the grassy spaces and bosky groves of Agra's chiefest park, each of our two travellers, fearful of receiving a marred first impression, closed her eyes, hoping the action unnoticed by her companion.

And thus both saw the Taj.

Passing through the noble ruddy gateway, in its echoing hall a whisper was exchanged, and by mutual consent the friends parted, moving as pilgrims to our world's greatest monument of Love, on either side of the tranquil water-alley leading to the gemmed marble tomb from its garden entrance, dividing the green shading trees, the cypress rows and roses. Beneath the stairways of the white terrace they met and mutely mounted till their eyes feasted

close on the utter perfection in proportion, the exquisite details of carving and inlay, holy-worded traceries, or flowers of precious stones. To Peggy, awed, this seemed a building brought down from the New Jerusalem by angels' hands; perfect. To Roma, whose glance embraced the whole in brooding thought, the river Jumna, gliding blue below, the guardian red stone mosques on either hand, came the thought that here was meant a symbol. A symbol that Shah Jehan's earth-love, red with human warmth, the delights of peace, flowers, running water in which he would fain ever more have lapped the Lady of his Palace, were unavailing. White, pure, as spiritual love, soars the Tomb; and yet no tomb is this of dead hope, but a casket telling all who see it how Love is undying, how it survives alone of all mankind's possessions, passions, thoughts; unsullied, indestructible.

"The Great Moguls. What a wonderful family! Conquerors and lovers, each true to his wife; and lovers even more than conquerors," she said unwittingly aloud.

"I really must read up about them," murmured Peggy.

Afterwards they noticed the eminent discretion of their domestics. Pollyann, always valiantly striving to share the sentiments of her almost worshipped lady, followed Roma at respectful distance. Veraswami, unbidden, kept in attendance on the Miss Sahib, gliding behind bushes and wearing an air of negligent interest in this Mohammedan masterpiece, like a right-minded Hindu. With how much greater enthusiasm he had bounded up the steps of Juggernauth's temple at Udaipur.

After the Taj, even the Red Fort of Agra seemed a lesser thing. Delhi came as a tale foreknown and staled.

For a brief week they glimpsed Simla, where Peggy pranced like a young wild goat up and down the everlasting khud, rejoicing in the tumbled sea of hill-peaks and the Olympian sensation. But Roma was a valley-dweller whose thoughts loved to be drawn upwards to

higher steeps as ideals; not to look down on ant-like fellow-humans and their specks of homes too far below for daily sympathy. Still the sight of gorges ablaze with tall-grown trees of rhododendron were to her joy; likewise that wondrous afterglow on the hills, transient as a poet's fancy of an unknown world. Unfeignedly she breathed long and deeply once the horrible twistings of the mountain train deposited them in the hot, fat air of the plains, where Lahore's hedges of roses or blue plumbago bloomed. How picturesque in her eyes were the Indian daily life scenes!—bullock ekkas, white or crimson garbed folk, after the waggonless hill-tracks and long-haired, wild hill-folk, muffled in drab-hued, ugly garments.

Lastly, one more long, hot train-day, when to a whirring accompaniment of electric fans in their Indian railway carriage, prodigal of space and air, Peggy listlessly watched the Indus, groping weariedly through dividing sands, its branches a beaten army. As to the barren desolation afterwards, like an immense playground delved by gigantic god-babes into forts and silly dry nullahs, Peggy enlivened the view by slyly drawing up the blue glasses of the triple windows, then rousing Roma, who, entranced in "Babar's Diary," was lost to sight or sound, by childishly crying out: "Look! look at the snow everywhere! It's Christmas."

At Rawal Pindi station Roma's beloved step-brother and his wife awaited them. Major Meredith's face was like a parchment mask, hiding the real self, a mine of kindness. Only his twinkling dark eyes betrayed him. His wife——

CHAPTER X

THE WAIL OF THE WIFE

BUT at this moment, as Peggy's voyage of memory ended, there entered a tall, deep-bosomed woman with a merry face tanned to the ripe shade of a year-old saddle, her abundant hair still a rich chestnut colour in spite of bleaching Indian suns.

"My! how shamefully I have neglected you both. But you will excuse me, I know. Susan's babies arrived this morning, and, poor dear, she does so hate dark faces, I have been paying her a visit. They are black twins; darlings! Peggy, would you like a present of one when it is grown enough?"

"A black baby? Me?"

Dora Meredith leant for support against a carved teak cabinet that engraved its pattern on her plump shoulder, while Roma joined in her mirth.

"Susy's an Australian—terrier," gurgled the hostess, "and her puppies are worth thirty rupees each, but I'll never sell them."

Recovering herself, she turned to a topic of less importance. "Also I come to say, Don't pack! My Phil has just sent a chit by an orderly saying that he has changed all arrangements for your going to Kashmir. He's got you a motor—that's luck! So you're both to stay for the inside of a week longer."

Who could have told from her breezy voice and warm smile this was crushing news to a tired housekeeper, herself preparing for a sorely-needed change to cooler airs? Roma guessed: she knew her India and gave vehement outcry, swelled by Peggy's protestations when understanding dawned.

Smiling warmly beneath her tan, Dora owned that her Philip certainly did write—there was the chit.

"*You* are to go just the same. Tell them they will be company for me." Then in wifely loyalty: "He doesn't really mean that he is keeping you to please himself. It's not in my poor old Phil to be selfish. It is I who am the selfish wretch, to go off leaving him alone with the hot weather coming on."

"Bah! The old Indian story: the wail of the wife, 'Let me stay, too!' How many women have I heard of who died out here through so-called unselfishness? As to Phil, I've known him years before you did, and when he does say a thing, as you know, it's got to be done. He selfish? If you ever saw him try—I have once or twice—it's the funniest exhibition!—ends nearly in weeps!" Roma laughed at early memories.

"But in common sense why not take a motor now?" demanded Peg.

She was overborne by wife and sister, vieing in adoring assurances: Phil knew best. Trust him. If he once settled the matter, etc., etc.

Dora, unconsciously humming, went off to do some house-closing anent her departure. Once more Peggy sought attention.

"Roma, it's rather odd, but your brother . . . you are not listening!"

"One minute. Yes. Here is a list from Colonel Auldjo's boat-agent in Srinagar, and" (in dismay) "he turns out to be a leather merchant and supplies all 'Kashmir goods to purchase at the natural cost.' *Goods!*

'Registered servants. Socks. *Skining* knives. House *boots*. Cook *boots*, and walnut-wood furniture, the cheap and best acceptable presents for England.' What a mistake!"

"House and cook *boats*," jeered Peg, getting her own back after the baby mistake. "And talking of Colonel Auldjo——"

At last Roma's wandering attention seemed reluctantly jerked back. She ceased puzzling over the multifarious business engaged in by every Srinagar tradesman and looked civil.

"I couldn't tell you last night when I heard the news because it was when we were all outside and that devil danced whirling down the road." (Pray, readers, excuse Peggy for using the local term for a revolving dust-spurt.) "Then we all rushed in as the storm came and there was such a banging of doors and clatter and smother, and you were dead-done, you told Polly so!—What do you think? My elusive pimpernel joined *his* regiment actually two years ago!"

"Colonel Auldjo's! And we never guessed! He could have told all about him. We-e-ll! At all events he will have taught the young man a lot by now; to wash, most certainly."

"Roma! I never expected that from you. As if my—my perhaps husband-to-be needed *tubbing!*" broke out Peggy indignantly. "And . . . and . . . I don't want any martinet's opinion, all about pipeclay and buttons; I only want my own. *I* shall be the one to suffer—how—however things go. Either this Ralph is horrid, or I—give up—Cowford." The thermometer's rise, and consequent nothing-to-do-ness because nobody could do anything, accounted for the speaker's sudden fall into self-pity. Her final gulp was real distress, and Roma, in contrition, apologised, consoled, tried her own home recipe of balm.

"Well, my hope, you poor dear, *is* just that the young Pretender will be either engaged already to some millionairess and set your conscience free, or such a scapegrace that you will be compelled to keep Cowford out of his clutches."

"He might be a bad lot," hopefully sighed a mollified mourner. Then in a conspirator's undertone:

"Has it struck you, your brother suspected something?"

"About our quest of the heir? Well, he asked at once who was the lucky owner of that old place he admired so much when he and Dora stayed with me three years ago. You were gone with your uncle to Llandrindod lodgings as usual for his cure. No one else in India knows of Cowford. So, taken aback, I boggled and said there was an unpleasing indecision about the ownership. Phil is very sharp. He ruminated; you may have noticed his way; then informed me that though nothing pleased him more than receiving confidences, whilst he flattered himself he could also have made a first-class detective, he never laid his nose to a trail unless invited or feared. He could be hot on a scent just now, but certain persons might trust him not to meddle."

"A certain person trusts him entirely," blushed Peggy. "Why do you open your eyes at me so? . . . I've been trying to tell you all morning. It slipped out last night somehow, what with dining in the garden and the red lamp shades and the shadows. You others were talking of tight skirts, but he invited me to come over to the big-tree bench while he smoked. Then he was so kind, asking me if I felt homesick, because he noticed a sudden sadness come over me yesterday."

The listener bit her lips. Peggy had confessed overnight to indigestion.

"And he asked me to call him Uncle Phil, as I call you Auntie, and said he was so sorry for me without any

man-relation to advise me, but whilst in India would I look on him as standing *in loco parentis.*"

"Overlooking the fact that I have tried to stand *in loco 'mar'-entis,*" was sharply interrupted. "So you told him your story. And does Dora also know it?"

"Of course not! Why? Auntie dear—are you vexed? He is your brother. I thought you would be pleased, and . . . after all——" Peggy opened her eyes like an aggrieved child. After all, it was her own secret and her first.

Roma understood, recognising the justice of the mute protest. She forced down a salt wave that her soul tasted, knowing she was jealous and that Peggy knew it. By good luck she pictured Phil, that old seasoned flirt, warbling his decoy call to this new-fledged bird in yesternight's darkness. She laughed outright.

"It's the very wisest thing you could have done, dear. And do tell me! Quick, I'm dying to hear what he said!"

"He was most sympathising." The narrator was emphatic. "And awfully surprised. He said it was truly generous of me—that was our only disagreement—but needed very, *ve-ry* careful consideration to do justice to my uncle's inmost core of anxiety as to the due administration of an estate involving the happiness of . . . Oh, tenants and so forth. Lastly—he knows him just a little."

"Is there anyone within the limits of possibility Phil does not know? What did he say?—But oh, had we known! Now, Colonel Auldjo——"

"Auntie, what does it matter? Colonel Auldjo is fine in his stiff-starched way, but he would never be intimate with the young fellows," declared experienced Peggy, whilst her elder listened amazed. "Now, here they tell me your stepbrother is their best chum and gets them out of all their scrapes."

"But, Peg, *do* say what he said."

"He teased me a little, asking what might be my ideal

of young Romeo. So I promptly told him, just like my great-grandfather painted by Opie. Tall, cheery, with light brown curling hair and blue eyes, looking as if he had just left off singing 'John Peel.' Why, I don't know, but the major stared as if fairly astonished, gave a long 'Wh-e-ew,' then a 'By Jove!' and laughed to himself till I longed to shake him. When he stopped he wiped his eyes and said gravely, 'Well, handsome is as handsome does. When you do meet your cousin you may get the surprise of your life. But, my good child, do *not* be disappointed if your Ralph Bowman strikes you as having rather foxy hair and a cocked nose. He is really known to be quite a smart officer. Only——'"

With a gallows' drop of voice and a befitting dead pause.

"Only *what?* Go on!"

"'Only what does it matter if he is rather a squinny little chap, when he is a good sort?'"

A second silence. Presently the comforter hazarded in a reflective tone:

"You are sure Phil was not stretching your understanding . . . Come!" (impatiently). "Is that not the classic rendering of pulling one's leg. Leave me to find out from him."

"No; please!" begged Peggy miserably. "I'd hate to be consulted over like a bad case. Promise not to talk about me to anybody. I would much rather speak to you and Uncle Phil separately."

CHAPTER XI

WHO IS HE?

EASIER said than done. When the major returned after twelve of a pitiless noon, having been up and out since 5.30, his first words were, "Where's Dora?" having eyes and ears alone for his helpmeet, excepting a desultory: "Roma, my child! Pretty Peggy! I've secured you both the only car warranted not to break down more than twice. Run through in two days to Srinagar, barring landslides or broken bridges. Now, believe me! I've done the best thing for you both—that's *flat!*"

Then laying his arm round his wife's shoulders, he yawned, owning himself too fagged for lunch, and was pityingly put to bed till four o'clock and coaxed with cold soup by his motherly spouse. When the sahib-log all awoke from siestas to be refreshed by hot baths and tea, a hired carriage appeared, provided by the Merediths that their guests and Pollyann might "eat the air" till seven along the dusty roads where Pindi's late glory of rose hedges and flowery gardens was as a tale told to incredulous ears, while even the woodlands of the Park seemed thin foliaged and scrubby to eyes used to deep woodlands of Home.

On returning the visitors found their hosts hanging over the chicken coops side by side. Phil apologized

for having only family dinners till his Dot left, because they two wanted to talk over things. Presumably they did so, after coffee on the neem-tree bench, where a gleam of sheet lightning revealed them sitting as lovers.

"Are married people in India often like that," whispered Peggy reverently.

"More than India gets credit for," answered Roma musingly. "And mostly when there are no children, as with these two. That upsets British ideas, doesn't it? But children are the crux of the married question out here; and *must* cause separation when the mother takes them home to school. If she returns to her husband at once the mites are miserable, and maybe neglected. If she stays by them he is either miserable or—consoles himself elsewhere. Sometimes . . ." she paused, then seemed soliloquising sardonically . . ." even without children to bar or bind, you'll see the most hideous contrast to this in married life. There India runs to extremes. It's the heat perhaps; idleness; and some stimulant craved for besides other than eternal whisky-pegs. Best not . . ."

Her voice trailed away in unbreathed memories. Peggy shivered slightly: it was not lively. Naturally at her age she applied all new ideas and experience to her precious engrossing self, who meant to avoid safely those rocks on which foolish elders seemed to have frequently steered straight to shipwreck. Certainly her nature cried for devotion, ay, even more beautiful than that of her Darby and Joan hosts; but with the lonely remembrance of an only child's life she also longed vaguely to clasp a future precious treasure in her arms beloved as her last carefully laid-by doll.

Next morning Major Meredith alone showed gaiety. "Warming up, Dottikin, one hundred and eight now," he remarked to his large lady. "Hot, hotter, hello! When you go what a bachelor spree I'll have! I like dining at mess."

" I know you do. And " (irrelevantly) " I'd really stay at home this minute " (to the listeners) " if Phil would only allow me to cut my hair off : one ought to be shaved in the hot weather ; and to wear no stays."

This almost tearful announcement was received with a marital " G-r-r-r. Cut off the one charm which snared me into matrimony ? And a fine woman like you turn yourself into a sailor's kit-sack ? "

A second dreary drive for the guests ended in watching the parting couple meandering arm-in-arm at the furthest limits of the burnt-up flower-plot. But this evening an unexpected incident towards bedtime aroused everyone from apathy.

Out to the verandah crept a woeful white figure, and Martha, Mrs. Meredith's ayah, uplifted her voice, Eastern fashion, in a wail, displaying bruised arms and a scratched visage. See what horrible injuries had been inflicted by Miss Sahib's Goanese ayah, the wicked one ! All quiet and innocent as she, Martha, was, the other had set on and belaboured her so that she barely escaped with life.

Horrified, Peggy sprang up, to be restrained by her friends, who, with utterly impartial severity, moved in a solemnly judicial procession to the back regions. Here, round another moaning ayah, stood a group of men-servants, who each and all pointed a condemning finger towards their limping comrade. " Her fault ! Martha began the fighting," all chorused, wagging puggareed heads.

Now brown Elizabeth gave her version in more robust though injured protest, speaking in fair English. She, whilst her missus was at dinner, went to the dhobie's house to press out six blouses, a dozen handkerchiefs and five—(further enumeration was suppressed)—for that kind man had lent her his flat-irons.

" Ugly old rascal ! He has two wives already. It's jealousy," whispered Mrs. Meredith.

Lo and behold ! Martha entered the godown and

at once attacked the innocent Elizabeth with fury. The latter defended herself as long as possible, until some of her hair was torn out. Even a Goanese Christian could not stand that, so she being bigger flung down her assailant, who pulled her also on the floor.

"Two rolling about all one hour," volunteered dispassionately the butler as the witness paused for breath.

"And, huzoor! see, memsahibs!" burst out Elizabeth afresh, catching up her outer garment to expose a brown thigh. "Then see what that bad one with no shame did. She bit here deep *into the meat.*"

The ayahs' battle ended in both being locked up in separate godowns.

Pollyann declared it was just what she always expected, for in her Indian experience ayahs were the cause of all mischief in any household. Indeed, considering Miss Peggy could fasten her blouses up the back all but a middle button and dressed her own hair, she, Pollyann, would gladly do all else of maiding if that black Portugee was sent about her business. Swami, decent man, always packed for everybody. He had been twenty-seven years in service with a friend of Colonel Auldjo, the latter finding him through the Yacht Club steward at Bombay when carefully seeking a respectable travelling servant for Mrs. Wray. Poor Veraswami's eyes had shone like torches on recognizing the Colonel-Sahib, for he was left desolate on the docks after seeing his late master and family off "home" for good.

Next morning a pair of penitents appeared, falling on the ground at their memsahib's feet, biblical fashion, both forgiven "this time," and luckily separated by Mrs. Meredith's departure. So for three more days the bungalow lay still more silent, ever hotter in the sweltering cantonment. The only difference was that on Major Meredith's return home before luncheon and dinner his first call now was: "Roma? Where are you?"

Peggy sat unheeded under the floppy punkah, disappointed, surprised, hurt. Now, now, so her inexperienced mind had imagined, her new Uncle Phil would devote himself to serious sympathetic consideration of his charming niece's surely most unusually interesting case. He would ransack memory—ask discreet questions of others to collect all available information concerning her possible future consort. And she would feel that he at least appreciated her really amazingly generous intention to renounce her cherished home in which she dwelt still daily in thought, imagining herself in Cowford directing, planning, weeding. . . .

Behold ! she was alone ; out of it. Brother and sister were all in all to each other, Dora gone, and their talk was an endless repetition of " Do you remember ? " chatting of bygone early days, prattling even foolishly of childhood's pranks, so it seemed to the silent listener staidly approaching her full-grown twenties. It seemed an unconscious relief to both that Dora, who had not shared in those dear golden days, was away.

Well, they were old. Roma was thirty-six and her brother, Peggy vaguely knew, had descended even far deeper down the misty vale of age. Their lives were so far played that all interest in the game must be over ; so they liked looking back——

" But my life ! mine ! is all close before me, to make or to mar. Any week, day, month I may meet this hateful foxy-haired supplanter," cried Peggy to her inmost self. For Colonel Auldjo's regiment was stationed at Peshawar and its officers to every man were certain, Uncle Phil said, to extract all possible leave for Kashmir, that paradise of sportsmen and golfers. " *And those two don't care !* "

It seemed terrible to feel thus alone, to rely only on oneself in the impending crisis that must determine whether she, Margaret Lee, would mate resignedly with

the good-hearted "squinny little chap," whom she must strive to respect or—whether she should spread her wings and fly free. Free to live on something well under three hundred a year for herself and Fräulein; free to work like other girls in London.

At what——?

And a vision of mean, solitary lodgings, blackened chop dinners, grinding toil at typewriting through sunny summer days, waiting for buses in rain, all always to be lived through alone, brought sickening anticipation to the lonely girl's soul. Surely—after so repressed, so chill-drizzling a youth as hers from eleven years old until some months ago, fate seemed too hard, too——!

"Hello! our little Blush-rose, you look as wilted as a yesterday's flower. Go out for a drive with Pollyann in a tonga this afternoon. Roma is coming round the hospital with me," drawled Major Meredith's meditative voice. "Get some colour for this evening. I've got a man coming to dine, to amuse you."

Kind!—only each evening the guest now invariably proved to be a senior, hailed as William or James by Meredith, whom these affectionately called Phil. But the Billys and Jimmys whom at first he had brought home as nice boys for pretty Peggy to make friends with—his subalterns—these last dreary days were unaccountably all on duty.

The third day Pollyann was dispatched at dawn in a travelling tonga to Murree, where she wished to spend a night visiting a sergeant-cousin's wife in a British regiment. Ladies' maids are most unwelcome in an Indian bungalow, where they cannot associate with native servants. Till lately, however, Pollyann remained comfortably disposed of in Bombay with a dressmaker sister, who was doing good business and drove out in her own (hired) carriage. At Pindi the faithful woman was looked on as one of the family, so that the major hospitably gave

her up his dressing-room, making shift with a curtained corner of his wife's apartment. Had not Pollyann as nursemaid boxed his ears when he tied the cat to Missie Baba Roma's perambulator, and took the pair out in the sun for a turn ?

With her went Goanese Elizabeth, perched behind, for Pollyann hated tonga back-seats, especially when bound for thirty odd miles uphill that meant everlastingly sliding off or holding on ; at which decision Elizabeth unaccountably smiled by showing all the whites of her eyes.

That last afternoon, therefore, Peggy felt selfishly exhilarated when her host drove her to the polo-ground to see a match. Roma was slightly headachy ; moreover, her brother rather peremptorily assured her she had better rest.

The horses being fresh needed careful driving, so till they reached the parched maidan Peggy postponed hopes of some crumb of comfort as to her private affairs. Then the mail-cart drew up in a line with heat-jaded-looking spectators all staring silently at a crowd of horse-legs enveloped in whirling dust clouds. Now and again arm-strokes emerged ; a sun-helmet. At last out burst one figure from the reek, galloping down the field after the ball, catching it a mighty stroke, chasing it on and on, pursued, caught up. Hurrah !

" A goal ! That's Bruce," yelled Major Meredith. And around the cry was echoed : " Bruce ! " " Well done, Robert, good man ! "

" Oh, who is he ? He's the best—how splendidly he rides," breathed Peggy in fervent admiration.

" Oh ! *he is*—but I'll bring him up to you. He's coming for a fresh tat."

The bell rang, the major hastily got down, leaving the syce at the horses' heads. Two minutes later Meredith returned with a tall, very upright and heated young man, who mopped a streaming face and looked straight at

Peggy with remarkably blue eyes. Major Meredith's arm was round his junior's shoulders in a comical heavy-father fashion, and he was reiterating :

"So glad you managed it, old chap. And you'll dine at mess with me to-night ; that's all right. Yes, here is my niece, Miss Lee. You'll do me a kindness, Robert, if you should meet my sister and her on the road to-morrow to look after or help them in any way."

The dust-powdered player, still aiming his gaze straight at the girlish child-face in the mail-cart, said something civil about being happy. Peggy murmured something polite about kindness. Then the player's fresh pony was hurriedly led up.

"Bruce—see you later. I'll wait for you," called the major in his slow, precise articulation. Bruce nodded, swung himself on his tat, quicker than any other rider there, or so thought one onlooker with eyes grown of late pathetic, and cherry mouth, touchingly drooping like a neglected child. Nevertheless Peggy's face was brightened wonderfully since some ten minutes. In a blissful reverie she heard Meredith apologizing for sending her back with his servant ; shining-eyed delivered his message to Roma, who frowned fretfully.

"Dining a friend at mess ?—our last night ! And because I have, or had, a headache. It was not really one—but Phil did not seem to want me at polo. . . . And because our dresses are all packed he would not bring his guest here. Then why ask him ?"

CHAPTER XII

HEY ! FOR THE HILLS !

O—O—OH ! how delicious to shiver in a grey Indian dawn, after days of torrid, horrid glare, in dust borne by wind like a blast from a fiery furnace. Peggy shivered, exulted, and hardly hearkened to Roma's entreaties, " Put on your woolly ; you'll get fever." The mentor herself was warmly wrapped as their motor defied distance, darting for miles through a dry brown plain till, this traversed, it dived into hollows of trees and welcome water, nearing, nearing the foot-hills.

" Thank goodness, last night's rain has laid the dust," she sleepily murmured. " What ? Never heard that deluge clattering like hailstones on the roof. You must have slept like a Peg-top."

" No ! Yes. . . . *Is* that a motor-bike ahead—that speck ? I do believe it is——"

" Horrid thing. Hope it will keep far enough off for us to escape its reek," grumbled Roma, obtuse for once, and closed her eyes till seven o'clock, her usual waking hour.

Peggy parted her lips to explain ; closed them tightly into a blissful curve of secrecy, and gave herself a happy hug. So on and up, ever up, their car climbed with turns and twists, till at last Rawal Pindi lay a blur in the misty plains four thousand feet below, and next minute an

opposite view showed a school of hill-peaks. Now Roma roused to wonder at Peggy's freshening cheeks and eager eyes and to look with curious pleasure at strings of Tommies tramping sturdily in tight khaki shorts to the cool, shady heights above. Long lines of transport camels loped alongside, roped together, a young one racing madly ahead, terrified by the motor monster, scrambling, sprawling for a mile, till exhaustion drove it into a side gully with straddling legs.

Murree! the car climbed a last peak and stopped on a bare summit, trees enveloping the surrounding buildings and hill-crests. Out sprang Peggy and stretched both arms above her head, singing in pure glee, "Hey! for the hills!"

From the other side of the car came a man's voice in cheery greeting and round stepped—a sun-god. Bah, what matter that his khaki suit was dust-grimed already; his face heated to the hue of a lightly-fried potato? Even Roma, clear-eyed, was struck by the tall figure with its air of buoyancy, the frank face and voice ringing true as a Burmese gong. She guessed even before Peggy, blushing like a red-tipped daisy, lamely announced, "Auntie, this is Uncle Phil's friend who——"

"Delighted to meet Major Meredith's sister," helped their herald. "I've got breakfast ready for you both at the dâk bungalow. This way. Look out—the path is rough. And there's a good soul, a maid of yours, in a bit of a fret over what I keep telling her was no loss, only——"

"Good morning, ma'am. If you please did you pick up Elizabeth on the road?" demanded Pollyann, in a stand-and-deliver tone.

To bewildered counter questions, in which Peggy as proprietress took the lead, "She started with me, that I do know," came in gloomy tones. "What's more, she was on the back seat when the ponies were changed. I'll

tell the truth. I shut my eyes and maybe slept going up them hills; and at the top—she was gone."

"Gone, bag and baggage! I've discovered that by inquiries of the tonga-driver," added their guide curtly. "Her baggage roll, rug and umbrella also missing, besides what he calls a water-coat."

"Mine. I lent her the rug and waterproof, but she took the umbrella without leave," commented the wide-eyed young mistress. "Oh, poor, poor soul. How did she get lost? . . . What?—her wages? I paid them two days ago, in advance; as she wanted to send the money to her children. . . . Why are you all laughing?"

"She is probably at Lahore by now, and seeking a fresh situation with some tale of woe. Never mind," explained Roma.

Bruce chimed in. "A good riddance. Lots of Indian servants hate going into Kashmir. She must have slipped off quietly after dropping her belongings and yours on the road, picked them up and got into some returning ekka. But what about her chits—letters from other mistresses? You've got them, so she's without a character."

"Of course." Peggy dived in a hand-bag like a smart young portmanteau; stared; shook out a pile of letters, picture-cards, photos in vain on the breakfast-table.

"Gone! an old offender. You are well rid of the hussy, Miss Lee," gravely decided Bruce in infinitely soothing tones. "But you need breakfast—and Mrs. Wray, too." ("Nice of him not to forget the aunt," thought Roma, ruefully trying, being so new to the rôle, to play the accommodating elder.) "Hallo! *Qui hai!* Here, Wilfred, Cuthbert, Algernon. *Boy!* Whatever your name is! Porridge, eggs and bacon, tea; *juldi*." The sahib's call boomed deep-noted and brought two scurrying attendants and breakfast, in which Bruce asked leave to join, because a slight accident to his bicycle kept him busy until the motor-

car arrived. How hungry they were in the high air ; how cheerful !

But before the weaker vessels were replenished Bruce had eaten half a loaf, all the chops, washed down by three cups of tea and was himself tucking Pollyann into her tonga with minute instructions, besides deadly threats to the alarmed driver as to not losing this passenger.

" No, no. Don't take her in the motor. Your bearer will be much more use. She'll be too tired to make your beds," he had rapidly decided, on being applied to. And his charges felt thankful that here was someone who did not shirk responsibility. A minute later he was rating the chauffeur for smoking a borrowed hookah instead of getting ready to start ; thus the car was ready, for a wonder, when its passengers appeared.

" I'll go on and order lunch at Dulai," the sun-god shouted back as he sprang on his steed . . . mounted his chariot . . . or, to put it plainly, straddled his motor-bike, given a helpful push by Veraswami, and bumped rattling into woodland shadows.

Trees ! how refreshing their greenness and shade as the car skirted corners, crawled past hundreds of blocking mule-carts, and was respectfully eyed by more and more British soldiers, often lads. " A little bit of 'ome," Roma heard one sigh to his chum, after glancing at the two Englishwomen neatly turned out. Mentally she blessed his round, honest face. Again, camels passed, jibbing or backing their loads of tent-poles into the car, sneering superciliously with elongated necks, which Peggy declared she would like to see adorned with turn-down starched collars.

Roma was able to palm off the old Eastern tale on the newcomer. " Do you know why the camel always looks so offensively superior ? It is because Allah has a hundred names, but the Mohammedans have only learned ninety-nine. The camel knows the hundredth—and he won't

tell." Presently she added absently, "It was Colonel Auldjo who told me that. He heard it from his orderly."

Said Peggy even more absently: "He really was quite nice. But I don't suppose we shall ever meet him again."

Her companion looked round; then suppressed some contradiction that only found expression in her eyes. "Who knows? He said he would perhaps go up after red bear. But we don't come under the heading of game—let us hope." The cynical inference as to their fortunes was lost on Peggy, rejoicing innocently in the sweet air and sun-gleams, the dappled shade, and glimpses of valleys far, far below.

Presently she turned, asking in her most coaxing confidingness, and that could be exceedingly winning, "But do tell me what you really think of him? You are so clever, and have so much insight into character. Just for my guidance."

"Of all things I detest being called clever. It sounds so like veneer," temporized Roma, hesitating unusually. Then taking a plunge: "But as to what I think, on short acquaintance, he is a thorough gentleman, true-hearted, straight and, from his eyes and whole expression, I should say strictly honourable."

"Ah! just what I think." Peggy drew a long, satisfied breath. "And do tell me what made you think so; what did he say or do that struck you? To my mind"—this in a whisper like a tiny breeze stirring hyacinth-bells—"he really seems quite perfect. *What was it?*"

But Roma frowned, sat upright, catching her breath, then cried warningly to the unheeding chauffeur, who was speeding dangerously down slopes among new hill-peaks, risking the sharpest turns of continual curves round outcropping cliff corners. She lay back, giving up the task as hopeless, presently, and, murmuring that, though not nervous, this was more dizzying than sea-sickness or the Simla train, closed her eyes. Therefore Peggy sat smiling

all over her face, and her older friend remained with delicate brows drawn together, a new and painful thought arisen in mind like a dark cloud-bank in a hitherto clear sky. Both women were thinking of—whom? "He" and "him" are such dangerously, misleadingly vague terms.

During two hours the car still rushed downwards, until bare hillsides dropped sheer into a narrow ravine where roared a brown river flecked with foam in swirling crescents.

"The Jhelum!" uttered Roma faintly.

Even Peggy was now bewildered, for the sullen water-noise filled the air, adding to the confusing sense of their perpetually turning, rapid descent.

The gorge deepened: closed in to rock walls merely sundered by a boiling, narrow torrent. A toll-house. A steeply flung bridge. The chauffeur at last stopped; his boiler steaming to bursting. While he took water Peggy crawled from the car into a yard of shade, for the noon heat was overpowering. Roma staggered after, a mere impression in black and white, so that the young babu in charge fetched her a rickety cane chair. Reclining then on a charpoy, European-wise amongst squatting friends, with a man-of-the-world air he volunteered to the visitors: "Kohala, this—frontier. Kashmir, see!" waving his hand to the bridge and rocks beyond. "Down there, Panch—and behin' *yours*," pointing backwards towards India.

The level ground acted as a cure. Gone were headache and faintness as the car started, refreshed, across the bridge, coasted cliffs and dived into tunnels, one long, dark, with a pin-point of light at its end, like an inverted telescope. Here in pitch blackness, Peggy was aware that her comrade stirred, sat upright, and—was it fancy?—seemed wiping her eyes. No; no! Blowing her nose, of course—not that Roma seemed to have had a cold.

A silly impression. When they emerged into hot sun-

shine and a wooded, widened ravine, harbouring every fourteen miles a pleasant rest-house, Roma looked pale but composed, and Peggy had the wit to refrain from uncalled-for personal remarks.

Dulai dâk bungalow is a pretty inn, sitting on the edge of the even louder-roaring, boulder-fretted river. The fence was thick-clustered with pink roses like large banksias; mulberry and plane trees threw deep shade.

And out from the verandah strode a beaming, blue-eyed figure with fresh-washed face and hands, but khaki suit more begrimed. "It will be filthy by evening, and if a Board of Health exists in Kashmir, which is much to be doubted, they will be after me. If you ladies look at me at all, wait till the day after to-morrow," entreated a cheery young man. "Here's lunch—I *may* join you? Thanks awfully"—this to Mrs. Wray, whom he regarded with slightly awed deference. She was so much handsomer, younger, more the Society woman, than his good friend, Major Meredith, had led him to expect. Fresh fish and vegetables; roses on the table ("I saw to that," put in Bruce, by no means hiding his light under a bushel), and the rushing water making noise enough to drown speech, except when two young persons bent towards each other. Its hoarse turmoil was a pretext for another's silence, and was congenial to a weary brain racked by useless, useless thinking. Such was the setting of the lunch under the verandah above the Jhelum.

Loth were Peggy and her new squire to leave, so that in the midst of their joyous chat it was the chauffeur who disturbed the party, humbly addressing Roma: "Huzoor, if stay late no room dâk bungalow." Bruce sprang up at duty's call. He would fizzle ahead and keep the biggest room he could appropriate by bungalow law of first arrival. At the worst both ladies could share that; as for himself, it would not be the first time he had slept in a dâk dining-room.

All that afternoon the car throbbed through the Jhelum valley, here more or less narrow and always changing in charm. Round each hill corner Peggy never failed to strain her gaze, often just seeing a moving speck disappearing round a far curve. But Roma enjoyed that delicious scenery the most. Glossy-leaved pomegranates lit with flame blossom made one side a joy for miles. To right, overhanging cliffs were interspersed with clinging trees or piled boulders. Everywhere white roses wreathed the boughs and drooped in snowy mantles, while the pink roses grew in low bushes, and wherever water dripped frequently down the rocks there spread beneath a fairy forest of maidenhair. Sometimes came miniature water-meadows, seeming unreal in their juicy freshness, that yet was cropped so close by tiny brown cattle, the herbage suggested some old-world scene of Fragonard, where gallants in artificial rusticity attended on daintily reclining court beauties.

Later, stopping for water at another bungalow, there again waited their gallant cavalier, hot-faced, oil-stained, but still a commanding figure, though only a khansamah bearing a welcome tea-tray obeyed his behests.

Lastly, as dusk was stealing into the enclosed valley, though sunshine still gleamed on the hill-tops, they swung on round dangerous corners into side gullies, over wooden bridges, spanning lesser ravines, where mimic waterfalls foamed milk-white. Suddenly Peggy spoke; being close friends, they had said little during the long drive, but what mattered that? They shared thoughts.

"Is he a captain, do you think? I purposely never mentioned his name, for fear that he wasn't. His bike-bag has only 'R. B. B.' on it, for I looked."

Then, as Roma obviously could only surmise they would find out, Peggy chortled: "R. B. seemes a fateful combination to me. Ralph Bowman. Robert Bruce."

"Don't forget Robert Bobby Bowles on ship-board," unkindly reminded her candid friend.

"Ugh! . . . But, just think, dearest, if only Robert Bruce were Ralph Bowman! Think——!!"

She chuckled. Few women really chuckle; but Peg did so delightfully, like the gurgling notes of a small bird too lazy to sing.

Roma wondered bewildered what to reply to this merry riddle, when the car drew up at Uri, a pretty, solitary inn, like its name somewhat suggesting Switzerland.

And a much-groomed (alas! to little results) but well-tubbed traveller greeted them from the rose-clustered verandah with the smile of a weary setting sun.

"All right. Got you two rooms; and tubs and fires are waiting. You would need fires, I knew, after a drop from one hundred and five to sixty something. Heugh! isn't it fresh?"

CHAPTER XIII

HE AND SHE

THERE was no need, absolutely none, the trio had agreed overnight, to leave by cockcrow, seeing that the run to Srinagar could easily be done by afternoon. Therefore it was only sensibly natural that Roma Wray should sleep soundly in her roughly-furnished, stone-floored room until her usual hour of waking.

Also, the valley being a new scene, the air exhilarating, equally naturally Peggy was out whilst the mists were rolling up the hillsides into cloud-wreaths and the sun was yet on tiptoe peering over the hilltops. Not alone. *She* never asked him to come. But hardly had she tripped over the dewy grass than out stepped he, exactly as if he had been watching from the front verandah. Indeed, Bruce cheerily explained: "I was doing a bit of mending to my bike when I spied you. How did you sleep? Those charpoys can be like a gridiron."

Reassuring him as to her precious repose, Peggy suddenly bethought herself of burying most of her face in a bunch of roses, because when people, or one person, to be precise, looks at one as if—if one were a living wonder! a Hebe, fresh in red and white, ready to trip to Apollo's beck joyously, it is embarrassing.

"How sweet! I never, never smelt such sweet roses!" she uttered.

"The Kashmir roses are famous for scent. I should like one . . . if you will give it to me. Thanks awfully . . . Yes"—sniffing fervently—"this is the very sweetest rose I ever knew. You haven't got a pin to spare by good luck. I don't want to lose this." And it was pinned into his buttonhole with exceedingly careful directions on his part. For (to be indiscreet) the young man declared his fingers so clumsy—possibly from mending the mechanism of a motor-bicycle—that, in pure pity for his comical air of awkwardness, Peggy exclaimed: "Don't! Oh! Wait! Here! I'll——!" So she did.

"Come down to the river? It must be worth seeing." urged the radiant youth.

And so they went; both agreeing for an hour to find it worth, well worth! the ramble. Suddenly the clatter of tonga ponies reached their ears.

"Hallo. There's that woman left the bungalow. Perhaps she'll think I ought to have seen her off," said Bruce, shading his eyes from the sun that had at last climbed the ridge. "Well, I gave her up my room yesterday (she crawled up to the bungalow just as my bath was ready, and I wasn't going to let her bag your two best rooms), so that may satisfy her. . . . Me? I slept in a room of sorts—no, not exactly a bedroom—but I've known worse. . . . Who is she? That's what bothers me. She called me by name and asked didn't I remember we had been *great* friends at Mussoorie. But for the life of me all I could recall was that we younger chaps used to call the dame Sticking-plaster."

At this both laughed. Then Peggy's pity over his suspected discomforts of the previous night changed to laughter as Bruce described how a pi-dog howled in the night at the moon, then almost full, so he shiveringly went out in his pyjamas to stone it, thinking of—Miss Lee's aunt. Mrs. Wray really seemed too tired at

dinner, he noticed, to talk much. The speaker's tone was not one of deep regret, for as result his attention could be devoted without rudeness almost entirely to the engaging niece. They laughed in concert again as Peggy confessed that until, no! *before* Bruce joined them in the desolate eating-room the previous evening, she wandered round disconsolately examining its glass-cupboards, counting the dusty biscuit boxes and bottles of beer or spirits, only cheered by a printed handbill requesting strangers when out for sport not to shoot cows by carelessness! Had he ever shot a cow?

Thank heavens no! one of these little brown or black beasts might be taken for a bear easily enough in twilight. There would be the dickens to pay of a fine, cattle being sacred up here, where the ruling powers were Hindu. Bruce supposed he would be stony-broke if such a misadventure happened, he being next door to a pauper. Fact! He wasn't pretending. He could pretend things and thought it fair enough to women with false faces; yes, or girls—such were mostly ages older than his present companion. But not to her. She had truth in her eyes—he was ready to swear to that. Might he just look?—without being rude—a little closer; because their colour was so unusual; *so*—Why! they *were!* He had told himself last night he must have been mistaken, therefore resolved to see for certain this morning. Some fools might call them just grey or blue, but they were aquamarine, the shade of all others he most admired.

How deliciously confusing to be thought of overnight, admired in the morning-light! At least if not exactly in words, well—Oh, any pretty girl can read what is conveyed in half a hundred other ways. How especially delightful when it is all new; when no man's voice (forgetting Bobby Bowles and Poona) has ever yet given praise except a wheezing croak, observing: "You nearly

beat me at draughts, child; you're improving. But, he! he! you won't beat your old uncle."

So Peggy replied with quite an artful alertness:

"See, there is the tonga again; it has crossed the valley and is opposite us. Why did we not see your mustard blister at dinner with the other people?"

"Ha, ha! That's good. She does irritate one at times to private profanity. I must remember a mustard blister. Well, to tell you in strict confidence, I headed her off. Told her she'd much better go straight to bed or she'd look shocking bad at the polo tournament. There is to be a big one at Srinagar, to-morrow afternoon. That's what brought me up. They want me to play for some reason. She's an inveterate talker, you see; and we none of us pined for more company, or so it seemed to me. *Did you?*"

This was an unfair personal shaft and brought a prettier flush to Peggy's face, pretty already as a dewy English rose. The archer gleefully added as in apology: "She asked the khansamah a lot of questions about your motor-car, hearing two ladies were coming. Finally she tackled me as to whether I'd seen you on the road and would there be room, did I think, for a third passenger, as she was shaken to a jelly. I said from a passing glimpse your motor was as hung round with contraptions as a Christmas-tree, and both ladies were half-buried in baggage and nursing clothes-bags stuffed with hats. If I hadn't choked her off Mrs. Sticking-plaster was capable of—— Hullo! Good-morning, Mrs. Wray. I hope you are rested and ready for the road."

In a whispered aside to Peggy, guessing a family compliment would please, and thinking himself a master of strategy, Bruce added:

"How handsome she is. That white streak in her black hair, like a plume, is quite fetching."

On her part, Roma, still a few yards distant, was

thinking much the same of him. Plenty of young soldiers she had seen, upright, tall and well-built like Bruce, but few with his air of vivacity in leash, as ready to spring into action as an arrow drawn to the ear. She admired the noble contour of his head. Not the square forehead and broad outline of a thinker, a leader. But the high brow and compressed shape, seeming to aspire, associated in mind with classic statues, representing doers; as Mercury, the trusty, rapid messenger of the high gods, divine yet not creative; formed to carry out the thoughts of greater divinities.

As to his golden brown hair, although shorn as close and brushed as sleek as any cavalry officer could bully it, rebellious small curls would grow and show to their owner's annoyance, almost in a night. Besides, Roma liked the frank Northern blue of the man's eyes that looked straight and open into the face of every other being he met. Some cavillers said, "Bruce stares so!" rather peevishly; but perhaps they could not flatter themselves that he was admiring besides thoroughly well seeing them. His features were well proportioned, the nose too broad-bridged and fleshed for the Athenian type, but shapely as his mouth, which he had a trick of drawing crookedly to the left when smiling, because in his small boyhood indiscreet old ladies used to call him an angel-child. So he jolly well stopped their silly babble.

His mouth now went awry soon, unsmiling. "Fool of a fellow!" he muttered, bending over his stiffened bike with puzzled frown. "Idiot that I was to trust any chauffeur to touch it! only——" Only he had wanted so greatly to accompany a certain little girl on her early stroll that he hastily entrusted the motor-car driver with the job. "It will take me a blessed hour to take this wretched machine to pieces now and get it right again—if it does go right," he said aloud, red

between stooping and mortification. "So I can't undertake to act outrider, Mrs. Wray, much as I'd like to be of any assistance. Lucky if I get to Srinagar in time to play in to-morrow's tournament."

"Oh, but that would never do! We will stay by you now and give you a lift if the worst comes to the worst," offered Roma, with one of those flashes of sympathy that endeared her to all her friends. One never quite knew what Roma would do or say; but it was sure to be generous and often original. Two young hearts blessed her inwardly. Two young faces wore a deprecating air, staring at a litter of screws, nuts, oilcans. But the trouble got righted. (Alas!)

Thus morning was nearing noon as the motor-car, reaching the most narrow, umbrageous and loveliest spot of all the valley, suddenly came to a halt.

"What? Have we punctured?" cried Roma, roused from dreamily staring at the foaming Jhelum pouring, rushing snowy-crested, travel-turbid and shouting hoarsely as a young emigrant fresh from native mountains, not as yet fretted by obstacles, or slackening sullen with home-sickness. White-stemmed poplars or planes leaned far over the flood; on both sides, crags, woods gave shade and trickling rock-rills made treble tinkling sounds heard against the organ bass background of the river's ceaseless roar. She started at the abrupt stop.

"I think it is—the motor-bike," answered Peggy, who had been craning out for the past hour, perhaps watching the beauties of the rocks to her right, or maybe gazing ahead. Both speakers were right.

"Hillo. Your tyre looks pretty ragged," said Bruce's jovial voice, appearing at the right side of the car, a trifling incident, yet by rights—well, no matter! "No, I've not punctured, thanks; only a nut loosened. . . . I say—you're stuck here for a good quarter of an

hour. Want water, too. Luckily here's a miniature Niagara. Won't you two ladies get out and stretch?"

They consented. Roma wandered a little way back to gather maidenhair and long sprays of white dog-roses that starred or mantled low tree-boughs. Returning, she found herself interested in a line of bullock-carts with Kashmiri drivers, their road blocked by the motor, and a group of pedestrian gipsies each and all equally interestedly surveying the surgical operations the car was undergoing.

Enriching them by a silver twopence, where copper farthings would have gone round better, as Veraswami respectfully regretted whilst helping the chauffeur, Roma took snapshots of the children. Dear, dirty little creatures they were; boys clothed each alike in a tiny skull cap and brief shirt that if once white would never, never be so again; a girl wearing more garments, or rather rags and tatters of dark red, her headgear shaped as a smoking-cap with huge tassels like imitation ear-rings of silver twist dangling at her ears, while a dozen locks of black hair were plaited with woollen strands to deceitful length, and these tails connected together on a semicircular woollen cord.

Queer! noted Roma. Good idea to collect types of native modes of hair-dressing all the world over. Thus putting her mind into the subject that for the time engaged it, the guardian gave no heed to what those two young folk might be saying or doing as they leaned over the river wall, rather close to each other, while remote from others. Why should she? Girls with this young century have turned a new ledger leaf on which no heading of Chaperon appears on top of the page. Nor can the writer inform readers. For even Peggy herself could not have told. It was all a vague delicious jumble of half-phrases, looks; sentences praising enthusiastically the river or the neighbouring

waterfall that jumped like a daring child out of yonder bluest blue sky-patch peering over the cliff down among alluring green branches. This uttered with never a real thought of the object seemingly lauded. As both knew.

Bruce was aware he was losing his head. Only the second day of meeting and he was letting himself go. Self-restraint where only self-interest was concerned was absolutely something to be flung to the winds. Yet his brain constantly prompted prudence now, as drum-beats keep timing music, lest haste should mar the enchanting tune.

There were eager requests, bashful promises. See him play in to-morrow's great match? Why, of course. "*We* will watch you!"

What! wear the same dress and hat as at Rawal-Pindi? Oh, but those were old rags; Peggy's best at that precise date happened to be packed on a bullock-cart. Ah! horrible thought, if that ekka were not to arrive by to-morrow!

"Wear the same—the very same!" insisted Bruce pleadingly. "They will be glad rags in my eyes. You could not—no, I don't positively believe you could!—look more—more—stunning."

The last word sounded school-boyish, the speaker knew, wanting to kick himself for not substituting some more felicitous phrase to suggest, if not venturing to express, the heart-hot utterances of admiration, rapture, his lips would fain have blurted out.

"Please, mum, missis done got in car. Him mended," observed a gentle voice. Veraswami's full dark eyes bent in an expression of mental salaam on the pair seemed to hold no further observation.

Awhile further on the ravine became yet more entrancingly beautiful. Then the road emerging into a wide, barren tract, Peggy, who still kept her attention fixed on a

whirring object ahead, spied the latter passing a tonga before vanishing round a curve. She withdrew her eyes with a sense of loneliness, otherwise her sharp sight must surely have noticed some following happenings.

Ten minutes passed. Again a sudden halt.

Touching his white puggaree, Veraswami politely announced :

" Memsahib squealing. Hi !—Stop ! mum. She her wildy-lone." (He was justly proud of this recently-acquired gem.)

An excited woman's voice approached, gasping in well-bred appeal. " Do please excuse me ! . . . but *can* you help ? . . . My tonga—it sounds incredible—but it jerked so just near here, that before I knew I found myself sitting on the road ! And it's gone——"

A large figure swathed in a dust-cloak, a flushed, handsome face and golden hair almost concealed under a motor bonnet and veil, appeared beside the car.

" Mrs. Blackadder——! ! " exclaimed both occupants.

For a perceptible pause all three women gazed at each other equally taken aback.

After the first expressions of surprise and inquiry the new-comer explained (truthfully) she had not had the faintest idea they were the two ladies who arrived at Uri overnight, or— Her ayah was also a new servant, or might—well, the former wretch she had on board ship would have recognized them. This one was a fool. Fancy ! that sitting beside the driver the creature never missed her mistress, nor heard the latter's voice uplifted in calls for help.

" Although very likely I was stunned for some seconds by the fall. My poor head feels so confused still. . . . No, I didn't fall on it ! . . . Thanks ! thanks. If you can give me a lift, dear Mrs. Wray, it would indeed be Christian charity."

Nothing less could be done. No. Not even when

five minutes later a distracted tonga-driver returned galloping his sweating ponies, with a fearful ayah wailing at his side. Mrs. Blackadder seemed overcome with faintness at fear of being jerked off afresh, or jolted after her fall. She bluntly begged to be taken on to Barramulla rest-house, there she could lie down and await her abominable vehicle.

Barramulla is the first *boatable* place met on the journey into Kashmir. Here the Jhelum flows wide, while under the willow-fringed *bund*, or raised bank, house-craft lie moored, awaiting owners.

Roma, who piqued herself on invariably gracious hospitality, was flawlessly civil to the inevitable guest. The latter, reclining against all available cushions in the corner, smiled with sweet faintness, persisting in frequently exerting herself to thank dear Mrs. Wray effusively, despite admonitions to rest.

Peggy sat glum. Her preceptress felt slightly provoked at this youthful lack of polished manner, even of sympathy. Certainly the intruder once attempted a facetious tone, asking: "Could it have been little Miss Lee whom I saw out at dawn in the meadows? Ah! now I recognize your blue dress. And how long have you known your companion, Master Robert? Isn't he a nice-looking boy?"

"It was not so very early. You left then, did you not? We started late," primly enunciated the so-called "little Miss Lee," who knew herself nearly as tall as her tormentress, though if it came to breadth she had neither wish nor weight to compete, as she maliciously reflected. The other questions she did not trouble to answer.

"Yes. We started later than usual—my fault for feeling tired," put in Roma, with the blandness of an ice-cream. "I was so glad you were able to go down to the river, dear Peggy. Those single wire bridges of the natives are so curious. I must make an effort to look at one closer myself on our return."

Now, is there a native wire bridge at Uri? Roma chanced it, rightly surmising the intruder did not know either. But the latter was a woman of the world, instantly repairing her false step by discovering that she was crowding Peggy, who sat midmost, and offering belated apologies and cajoleries.

Bruce, who stood in the Barramulla dâk bungalow porch exchanging Kashmiri badinage with the inn-keeper, greeted the occupants of the car with a rousing: "Hul-lo! Aren't you awfully late? I've been quite in a stew waiting.—*Good* morning, Mrs. Blackley; beg your pardon, Blackmore. . . . What?—eh! Oh—of course." Then to Roma: "As I said, I've been waiting—to borrow your man's spanner. My Rosinante—not dead-lame—but hobbling. . . . Ah, Veraswami! good man! coming to lend a hand?"

Retreating rapidly, he took to much investigation of his machine until the rest had begun lunch; then fed alone at the far end of the long table, replying to a playful call of invitation from Mrs. Blackadder, that he was a regular tinker, streaming oil, not fit to approach ladies in his present filthy condition.

Wonderful how sprightly the "foundling," as Mrs. Blackadder called herself, was now become. So much rested that really she did not require a room to lie down in; indeed, meekly begged to share that in which her charitable Samaritans were washing off the road-dust. It was not worth paying for a second room, she economically observed; indeed, she quite overlooked later giving at all towards this trifling expense. The two friends could not exchange a word in private.

Peggy, escaping outside, flung herself on the sward of the bank, and in half a minute perceived a shadow at her side.

"Just look at this real white clover!—and a blessed dandelion! Isn't it soothing to behold them? I've seen no home-flowers anywhere in India," she prattled.

I saw you were vexed. Tell me. How did the woman manage it?" asked Bruce, in a low voice of infinite fellow-feeling, sinking on the slope at her side.

They talked over the interloper in utter accord; for, being young, therefore clear-sighted, they were convinced, *she* did the trick as much to annoy their two selves as to suit her personal comfort. Mildly both pitied Roma for being so easily deceived.

"But at least yesterday and this morning was a golden time. I've never had such a delightful run into Kashmir in my life, and this is my fourth. And, I say, it won't be all over soon, will it? You'll allow me to call and that sort of thing?" Bruce was enthusiastic yet ridiculously humble.

Peggy felt a delicious fear. "Oh, we'd both love to have your—help." And she was so childishly frank by nature her shyness now was the more alluring. "Only. . . . Well, you will know so many people. We ought not to—to——"

Meantime another couple were discussing Bruce. Or rather Mrs. Blackadder was taking his character gently to pieces, and serving up morsels to Roma in a sauce of milky human kindness. "Isn't he good-looking?—quite a temptation, I call it, for him to make fools, as he does, of the silly women and girls who do so run after him. . . . What? a friend of your brother's? Oh, he is most popular as a man's man; plays games splendidly. Cards also, too much I am afraid—poor fellow, let us hope his luck will last, or he may be ruined, for he has not got a shilling. You won't mind, I know, if I just give you a least little hint of warning where your dear little niece is concerned, that he has the name of being a sad trifler. They seem to be getting on together so well now."

From an angular perch in the porch corner, Mrs. Blackadder sent a look of pitying benevolence towards Damon and Phyllis among the Kashmiri buttercups.

Roma stiffened; looked politely bored, and intimated that the kind consideration of her companion was wholly superfluous. "In these days girls do very much as they please as to passing acquaintanceships, and claim and really do seem to be able to look after themselves much better than we did in our girlhood."

Mrs. Blackadder figuratively retreated. She spoke of society at Srinagar, lightly indicated all the "best people" her dear friends. "What! you have no introductions to any of them? Oh, but they will love to know you" (flatteringly). "It is my third year up here. If I had known on board ship we could have arranged so nicely to come all the way together. Even as it is——?"

She hesitated, really with finished charm; sighed, pressing her strong white hand to her temples, wondered dared she ask a great, great favour? It was to be taken on in dear Mrs. Wray's motor, now, to Srinagar. There the speaker was to stay with General and Mrs. Fyer-flaught—such dear friends. To think that by four o'clock, or before five, one could be at the weary journey's end and enjoy delicious tea and a refreshing bath, and sit comfortably down to dinner. (She could borrow an evening frock from her hostess.) The alternative was so horrid! Waiting all alone here for that beastly tonga and sleeping in one more of these bare second-class offenders' prison cells.

As Roma, taken aback, showed indecision, honestly wishful to do always any kind action, but with misgivings apprehending Peggy's dislike of the unwelcome third, besides warned by disagreeable memories and impressions of her own despite the decided magnetism of Mrs. Blackadder's fascination when, as now, its owner exerted it, the latter apologized with a rueful twist of her beautiful mouth.

"I see. You would—only it is little Miss Lee who may be uncomfy. And she seems to have taken some

megrim against poor middle-aged me in her pretty baby head. But how you do spoil her! Surely if you say I may come, a mere child like that, whom I suppose you have brought out here to enjoy herself at your expense—nothing kinder can any woman do!—surely she need not dictate to her aunt."

"She is not my niece, in the first place," returned Roma dryly, whom flattery always sickened. "And secondly, you must ask her leave as well as mine, for we share the motor."

"Is that so? Then I must make my excuses for not thanking her as well as yourself for bringing me so far."

Mrs. Blackadder rose light as an india-rubber ball. There was no time to lose. The chauffeur was bustling round his car. In ten seconds she was besmearing Peggy with honeyed apology and sticky gratitude, who felt taken at disadvantage sitting on the ground.

"And now," sighed the grateful supposed enemy, "I suppose it is good-bye to my luck meeting you all three. For Mrs. Wray, who is abso*lute*ly unselfish, is kind enough to say she would be glad for me to go on to Srinagar in the car, and have a delightful tea and delicious bath and surprise my dear friends at dinner. Only she is just a little afraid you would be crowded—(it is hateful to be so large as I am!)—and that as part owner of the car you might prefer to have more room for your *toesies* than poor me for company."

Peggy flamed like a pomegranate bud.

"What? I—? On the contrary, I never object to Aunt Roma's wishes. You must have mistaken her. I don't mind—of—of course—if you wish it."

"Oh, then that's all right. A million million thanks. I'll come with *pleasure*. I'll just tell your aunt. How lucky that I brought my dressing-bag from the tonga. I never part from it.—Bruce, my dear boy, *would* you mind getting it for me from the khansamah's office?"

She bustled away. Bruce shot one comical side-grin at Peggy, who sat on dumbfounded and answered his look with a mute: "I ask you! could anybody have done any mortal thing else?"

("She called him 'Bruce,' pure and simple, without Mr. or Captain, or whatever he is," uttered a horrified accuser that night late, recounting dual suspicions of Sticking-plaster. Roma laughed at the epithet, but betrayed doubts as to Peggy's accuracy of hearing. "Whatever else she may be, Lily Brown that was never was guilty of a solecism at school when a nobody. And now she is as accomplished as any other woman of the world. She may have called him Robert!" Peggy pouted; certain of what she mentally styled a true fact.)

CHAPTER XIV

THE CITY OF THE SUN

THE poplar avenue of some thirty odd miles, stretching by the Jhelum almost straight from Barramulla riverside village to Srinagar, City of the Sun, stands a living witness to Nur Mahal's power as to her love of shade and beautiful scenery. Her story, her extraordinary influence when widowed and faded in beauty over Jehangir, who only then persuaded her whom he had loved from her childhood to be his consort, is one of the several strange love-romances of the great Moghuls.

At first it was dreamily soothing to watch the grey slender tree-stems slide past in unending succession ; or to look upwards at their flattened masses of foliage, lofty screens between which mere slices of sky could be seen. But as one hour passed, then another, the unvarying monotony on either side debased the lining pillars to paling-posts, the narrowing perspective of the road to an unending disillusion.

"On—hurry on ! Srinagar must lie at the end of this stretch," Peggy repeatedly told herself, hopeful to espy a gleam of river and town afar. Lo ! the opening gained revealed only a meadow thickly dotted with diminutive brown cattle. As this flashed by another vista of interminable poplar avenue appeared.

"There ! this surely is the end." Nay, the end still lay monotonously remote.

Bruce, who once passed them on his bumping, buzzing vehicle, thought the same ; or more. Next the sky grew sullen and grey ; presently it rained in chill showers.

To a sensitive being how unpleasant it is to be seated for any length of time next somebody whom one dislikes, or whose personality is antipathetic. To poor Peggy it meant uneasiness amounting to suffering. Now, had Mrs. Blackadder been thinking unkindness of the girl the result would doubtless have been still more silently disagreeable. But to do the full-blown Lily justice, her mind was occupied with purely personal considerations. These two pawns at her side she had moved on a sudden freak ; thereby altering the disposition of her present game of chess. They would probably confab together later, and on next meeting be nasty ; well, she could be beforehand with them and cold.

Against Bruce she bore a long-standing grudge. Lily flattered herself on having put a small spoke in his wheel to-day, anyway. So far, so good. But her dear friend Viva Fyerflaught ! This unexpectedly early appearance might provoke one of that pussy-cat's huffs—borrowing clothes, too. The guest's story needed stronger seasoning, so she concocted its cooking behind closed white eyelids, for staring out of train or motor gives a strained look to one's eyes at dinner.

Of the three car occupants Roma alone enjoyed fully the sight of flat meads of dwarf iris, like blue lakes, stretching for miles, or snowdrifts of tall white iris on every hillock (which are often native burial places) ; the fragrance of these, the scented fleur-de-lys, reaching the road in strong whiffs. Two-storied village houses were likewise interesting ; so crazily built of mud bricks, their wooden galleries unpainted, as were the shutters to the windows, void of glass, looking like empty eye-sockets. As to the Kashmiri folk, these seemed utterly thriftless in their unwashed, unmended garments of coarse linen, dirty as

old sacking. Merry enough. The women were frequently handsome, and all possessed peculiarly level dark brows, fine eyes and teeth, square purposeful visages. But the men were shambling, feeble folk, often with foolish faces under their babyish skull-caps.

Oh! How stupefying was this unending double row of tree-trunks: hypnotising!

At last. A green plain; houses, a reverberating rattle over a long wooden bridge, the now dignified wide Jhelum sliding grey below, a native bazaar crowded with curious sights, and—Mrs. Blackadder's voice.

"*Dekko!* Please, Mrs. Wray, down this road. It's no distance to the general's. If you drop me you will be rid of me, and it's all on the way."

If running round three-quarters of a circle instead of the remaining fourth can by any casuistry be termed "on the way," the assertion was true.

There followed an hour or two of nightmare impressions.

Down roads sheltered by immense trees to deposit an unexpected visitor amongst astonished tennis players, the reward being an infantile hand-waggle and parting clear call:

"Good-bye. So glad we met. You'd better hurry on to the hotel now, or you may miss getting rooms. Hope you'll enjoy Kashmir."

So turning with elastic step to embrace her slowly approaching, perplexed Viva, Lily Blackadder conveyed an impression to the tennis party of good-natured patronage, also avoiding an introduction to the general bustling up, corpulent in shirt and flannels, with bursting eyeballs and that hot stewed-tomato complexion rarely reached to perfection except by Britishers in India.

No; not yet to the hotel, commanded Roma, recovering the lead with amused annoyance. She recognized Fyerflaught from afar as a former acquaintance of her youth; guessed also the way hither was a détour.

To the houseboat agent. Time had been lost, and the

tourist rush for boats was reported terrific this season. What ?

The sahib had come—waited—left them a scrawl on a leaf from Ahamdu Lall's greasy note-book. " Inspected this lot. May do later as Hobson's Choice. Please follow to Box and Co., where will sample tubs.—R.B." On half a mile down another tree-gloomed road in the drizzle now increased to a deluge.

Here the chauffeur struck ; justifiably submitting that all these divagations were extra to his agreement, whilst the stout memsahib had not even given him a pice of baksheesh. Roma pacified him generously ; bade him leave luggage and bearer at the hotel. A boat or gharri would suffice for——

" Mum, missie ! Tea. Done bring tea in hot bottle." Veraswami, with firm insistence proffered steaming cups from his thermos, hurt voice and rolling eyes conveying his shocked sense of impropriety at missing this daily rite. They drank standing in puddles ; pursued inquiries and one Robert Bruce in the agency. What—gone ?

The gentleman went on board several boats, then left a message would they please follow him on a *shikara* to the Chenar Bagh.

" What's a shikara—a hunt ? " panted Peggy, racing along the now streaming bund and down river-steps after Roma, who seemed borne on one of her flights of impulse. Neither remembered an umbrella, and rain ran down their noses.

" No—this." Roma jumped into a flat-bottomed boat, where she crouched under a dripping awning.

" One word does sound so like another," half grumbled Peggy, yet her eyes danced in spite of the everlasting plash of spade-shaped paddles, whilst river and rain seemed combining in a grey blur ; the wind rising, the skies dissolving. After twenty minutes a giant Noah's ark loomed alongside.

"Hi! Stop! Here!" yelled an already well-known voice with a foxhunter's ring. "Heavens! you are both drenched!—please listen." There followed a hasty enumeration of some nine craft available—doongas or native boats, with mere matting roofs and butter-muslin windows; houseboat doongas, an improved variety of the former, boasting glass windows. Lastly, this Noah's ark sort—*pukka*; mosquito slides, windows, a big saloon, crowning all a real roof.

"No, no," shrilled Peggy. "We settled at Pindi to take each a dear little boat, nice and light, able to go up any creek, not a luxurious lumbering Dreadnought."

"Yes, yes. A solid vessel for me—now. Ideas evolved in heat at Pindi are washed clean off my slate by this weather," pronounced Roma with flashing decision. "You may look at doongas, but I'll inspect arks fit for another deluge."

"Then shall I take Miss Lee in my boat? I've to engage a doonga for a man coming up immediately. This babu can accompany you," Bruce hurriedly suggested, snatching at his chance.

Peggy replied for her guardian. "Oh, that will be best. We had better divide, had not we?" and hopped out into the now lessening downpour. Roma stopped—perforce. She looked round appraisingly; when the last raindrops ceased splashing in the ruffled water she permitted the babu to show other boats which he excitedly lauded as "belonging my agence." That houseboat they had just quitted was merely on the Motamid Durbar's list.

"Go back!" ordered Roma. To a torrent of urgent talk she simply uttered. "Be silent. I reflect."

Half an hour later a returning dove and raven, as they announced themselves, found her in the first seen boat, finishing the inventory with a gleeful manji, or boat-owner. "'Four of England wooden chairs' (worse than

those in my garden !), 'six cain armchairs, with stuffing cusshions.' . . . Oh, see here ! " looking up from a sudden descent to her knees and dive into a cupboard to verify the existence of six finger-bowls inserted bewilderingly amongst the furniture. " Do as you please, my Peggikin ; take a beehive or a Moses' ark of bulrushes, but this boat-home will suit your venerable aunt. I've looked over a grubby *Water-lily* and a *Ladybird* fit for a family of fifteen, and I'm dead tired. This has two bedrooms, two bath-rooms, a dining-saloon, and drawing-room. If you don't want to share it, Pollyann can—but don't be a goose ! "

" Not a goose but an aquatic bird of sorts. *I* want to feel afterwards that I lived a genuine Kashmiri water-life. One might as well be on the Thames entertaining at Henley as in this. Now we've seen heaps and heaps of doongas till my brain is broth——"

Bruce here groaned and held a bursting head between his hands.

" And in the end we've found a perfect duck, the *Flyin' Fish*—only two wee rooms, but with geranium-pots and a bulbul in a queer cage and clean muslins—Oh, I'd love to have it for my own and tie it on to yours. Do, approve ! quick, Darling."

" And eat your meals on a tray on your bed unless when you're a good girl I invite you to a Christian dinner," jibed Roma, still busily jotting down in her note-book, and murmuring aloud. (" Muslin for new curtains, more *numdahs* (washable rugs). Lots of embroideries wanted. All stores. . . . To-morrow morning will be pretty lively.) . . . *I* mean to entertain ! But I suppose that would not be the simple life, so you will sit with Pollyann and sup bread and milk. I'll give a dinner-party " (courageously) " to-morrow night. Will you venture to come ? Veraswami solemnly assures me he ' very good cook. Make all soups, side-dishes, fricass, sweets and saltsys '—whatever they may mean."

She shot the invitation gaily at Bruce, who reddened under his tan as he rather shyly accepted; then she added with a rapturous glance out of window:

"What a glorious sky! The clouds were so wonderful a little while ago. I fairly forced myself to leave off admiring and get on with my work. But I suppose you were both too busied to notice?"

No reply. Both looked guiltily at the floor. Not notice—! They had allowed their shikara to drift whilst they gazed. When the rain-pall slowly rolled northwards, the wind tearing off great fragments from its edges, one of these was transformed by the revealed sun into a mass of fulvous brown, like a sky god's fur mantle charged with ruddy colour. Gorgeously it showed up against a sunset expanse of coldest, clearest blue that changed earthwards to pale gold. How the river gleamed with ripples. What hundreds of birds burst into a chorus of thanksgiving, their song bursting from the huge trees of the Chenar Bagh (grove of planes) and the Maharajah's garden.

"Oh, a wonderful cloud!" Peggy had murmured softly. "Never have I seen one like it before. What does its colour remind you of?"

"Of your hair. It is exactly the same shade. Glorious, I call it," promptly came in answer.

At that Peggy blushed, demurred, protested she looked these two past travelling days like a dusty fox; now a draggle-tailed, miry fox. It was a family failing, this colour. At that came a sudden memory. "What would you think of your cousin if you saw a squinny, foxy-haired little chap?"

Bruce wondered why her face changed, that she broke off short, then in a small voice proposed returning to Aunt Roma.

"What does the Motamid Durbar mean?" Bruce was now explaining. "Why a jolly good thing for all of

us foreigners. It's a Kashmiri government office for our help and guidance. They'll hire you a houseboat or a cook, and if you want advice or to threaten, say, a cheating shopkeeper, down to a sweeper, just say you'll apply to the M.D. and see their tails tucked in like frightened dogs. The Motamid *makes* them swill out their house-boats properly and disinfect before letting. So you're to be congratulated. What is the name of this boat, by the way ? "

Roma, measuring old curtains for new ones by help of her outstretched arm, neither knew nor cared.

" It's not in front. There is nasturtium trained round the door," announced Peggy, who always looked for a boat's name as ' the first thing.'

Bruce leant out of the window, twisting himself to see the boat's side ; then drew back. " It's the *Pink Lotus.*"

" Not really, truly ? How ridiculous ! This great lolloping barge ! " scoffed Peggy. " Oh, Roma—we must change it. Call it the *Great Eastern.* It's a misnomer."

" No worse than your *Flyin' Fish.* ' What's in a name ? ' (Five lengths of this hanky ; I'll put a knot in the corner)."

" And mine, or rather my friend's boat, is *The Sharp Ship.* The *manji* tells me a babu chose it as a ' best name in English,' " contributed Bruce, whose eyes were alight with mischief. " I've engaged it for my pal, but he lends it to me for the rest of this ten days' leave. So we may meet on our voyages."

" Goodness ! It's after seven. We must be off ! " Roma, with the rush of a tornado, swept round, gathering up her scattered belongings, then hurooshed the others into the row-boats.

Bruce was being put up in a friend's boat. Roma and Peggy drove to Nedou's—pride and sole hotel of Srinagar ; where the dullness of a first evening among

people whom one does not know but who all appear to know each other awaited them.

Later, in the privacy of Roma's bedroom, the latter, whilst brushing her long black hair, with its solitary curious silver streak, asked in a quiet voice :

"About our new friend. Do you want him to join us on the river, Peggy, dear? Because you know——"

"Oh, I *know!* I do know. Don't ask me. I don't know what I want!" Wherewith there came a sudden splash of tears, followed by a swish of draperies and an exit.

Roma put down her brush, and bending forward, looked hard at her own likeness in the glass, as if consulting it.

"In two days!" she soliloquized, under her breath. "Well, such things have happened before. But is this going to be the spurt of a match, or a lifelong fire? Phil! Phil! dear old fellow! if you had only spoken out plainly instead of clucking like a brooding hen who doesn't want anybody to see her eggs. Still—you don't often make a mistake."

So, trusting that Bruce had golden expectations, eclipsing Cousin Ralph and the sober charms of Cowford, the elder woman sought sleep, believing that the girl she loved would rather be left in solitude.

CHAPTER XV

A GREAT SURPRISE

A SCRIMMAGE!

Rival polo teams were racing towards a distant goal, and their hoof-beats on the turf echoed in Peggy's pulses. The novice could hardly sit still; two glove buttons broke loose with hand-clapping; her body poised tense, mentally taking part in each stroke dealt by one tall rider on a bay pony.

As to the girl's straining looks! Roma stealing now and again a covert glance, amused yet secretly anxious, commented in sarcasm to her appreciative self: "One might know how the play goes 'by the swift rolling of her swivel eye.'"

The ground itself was not unlike any polo ground at home, with its flat sward and environing heavy-headed trees. White marquees backed a rabble of cane chairs and small tables, for a royal wedding in the Ruling House was being celebrated throughout a fortnight's festivities, during which the Maharajah invited European visitors to what these familiarly termed "free teas." Overlooking the rows of officers' good-looking wives, whose husbands on leave stood behind, Roma's artistic attention turned to the grouping of native princes or nobles beyond; their puggarees of canary, turquoise, or apricot, of indescribable shades, brightening the scene like huge flowers. Presently

she was addressed by a deep contralto voice with a peculiar intonation recalling a school friendship of long ago.

"Roma Wray!" The double appellation was itself a trick peculiar to the speaker. This was a tall woman, harsh-featured, yet with an arresting air of distinction helped by a remarkably well-tailored skirt and coat and an orange quill feather in her hat. One could hardly imagine Mrs. Drax in any but a mannish garb, and she somehow trailed her parasol by her side, hand on handle, in a way suggesting generations of ancestors whose grasp went instinctively to sword hilt.

"I heard from the Raymonds you were coming up here, so I've been looking out for you. You stayed with them at Dustipore lately."

"Yes. They told me of you also. And I was so glad to hear good news." Roma's voice softened; her hand-clasp was even affectionate, conveying some sympathetic message.

Almost gruffly her girlhood's friend, Diana Drax, nodded.

"Thanks. They told you, I suppose, about me—spending Christmas alone, up on a hill fort? Thought me mad? Didn't say much? All the better."

"They said you had adopted a little boy, an orphan. They hoped—and I think one may feel sure—he will be someday a real comfort to you."

They two were standing apart, yet lowered their voices.

"Will be! He is. Bless him! But you shall see my sonny and some day I'll tell you—perhaps," jerked out Mrs. Drax. When last they two had met she was as one bound on the torture wheel, and Roma, fresh herself from being racked, was the only being whose mute fellow-feelings did not jar upon the sufferer's agony. Neither could forget that time.

But Mrs. Drax roused—her manner implying, "Let us keep that skeleton closet tight shut for the present.

"Come and be introduced to the Resident and his

wife. I was sitting beside her and she asked me to bring you up. . . . Where is your boat? . . . Mine's not far off. Will you come to me first? . . . Yes, I'll dine to-night with pleasure."

Mrs. Drax drew Roma off to make acquaintance with the notables. Peggy pleaded to stay, scarcely with-drawing her eyes one instant from the engrossing game. She did not mind being left alone, so long as she did not miss—— Ah! another goal.

Presently a girl's voice behind drawled:

"Isn't Captain Bowman in good form? He's their best man."

A minute passed of startled agitation, almost fear, wonder, hesitation. Then Peggy screwed her courage up, and turning stammered:

"Could you please tell me—I haven't a programme—which is Captain Bowman? And does he belong to the Fifty-fifth Cavalry."

"Don't you know him?" returned a pert damsel, uplifting her chin. "Because if you don't, it is rather difficult to point him out. He is riding a bay." She whispered to a friend, giggling.

Peggy drew into her shell, blaming herself for addressing a stranger; more furious that her cheeks were scorching, horribly afraid that those rude minxes behind would see even the nape of her neck red and draw insolent conclusions. Worse! there were three bay ponies in the English team; their opponents being Mayo College princes.

Passing behind a group where Mrs. Blackadder seemed queening it with an air of old habit, Roma meantime caught the words:

"Only part of the journey by tonga—it's too wicked a way to get to paradise. After Murree I shared a motor on; rather a squash. It's no good trying to do a kindness or be economical in travelling. Next time I'll have a car all to myself and be comfortable."

The polo was ended, a victory for the Indian princelings, and applause resounded on all sides of the ground, both from native onlookers and the white-faced sahib-log. Only one spectator perhaps sat sore-hearted, well-nigh disappointed to tears by this defeat. When Roma, diving into the welter, retrieved her deserted charge, she was rewarded by a nip in the arm, while a woeful whisper followed.

"What do you think? *He is here!*"

"He! Who?"

"My cousin. The very devil," hissed Peggy.

Roma felt as startled as if a baby, lisping its first syllables were to give vent to a brimstone swear-word; for Peggy was such a particularly quietly brought-up girl. Then she remembered that Uncle Peregrine used to mildly croak out that expression when confronted with some totally unforeseen move of an opponent at backgammon.

No more could then be interchanged, for Roma's acquaintances, new and old, pressed around, and it was, "Tea or coffee?" "Strawberries? Ices?" from the men, and "What do you think of Kashmir?" from everyone. Our friends waited till many spectators streamed away, detained by Peggy's reluctance to leave. At last, when only two perfectly uninteresting British polo players, hailed as Brown and Smith, showed themselves, hot and cheerful, they walked towards the Chenar Bagh in company of Mrs. Drax and an elderly pair whose houseboat lay alongside the *Pink Lotus*, a fact both hailed with, "Do you hear, mother?" . . . "Isn't that pleasant, father? It will be so nice and sociable." Almost needless to add they belonged to the English middle-class; benevolent, Evangelical. Doctor Brabble was lately retired from practice, having acquired fame and a fair fortune; so the stout, clean-shaven little man and his comely, quiet spouse were now enlarging their

minds by travel and shedding benevolence on all the world. Naturally, Brabble, following primitive man's ways, trotted after the youngest woman present.

"Did you hear the story of how the Brahmin priests here some years ago had a vision that the Maharajah's grandpapa's soul was entered into a fish located between the town bridges. So government forbade anybody to fish, excepting the priests."

"Yes," Peggy absently-minded smiled. "I know," not knowing what he was saying in the least, to the narrator's discomfiture. Roma came to the rescue pityingly, for things indeed were complicated enough to excuse poor Peggy, if her brain resembled a scrambled egg.

Into the group filling the *Lotus* cabin presently glided a Kashmiri servant, wearing a green waistcoat outside his long white linen coat and presenting a card, "Tikett, lady sahib."

Roma, with a really startled glance towards Peggy, read aloud, to the latter's stupefaction :

"Captain R. B. Bowman,
"55th Cavalry."

Consternation—silence. The three visitors felt that some untoward incident was to the fore. And all heads turned to the doorway, where, in a tense hush there appeared the face and form of—Robert Bruce. Astonished, as not a word greeted him, he looked at the ring of staring eyes.

"You? you? This is a surprise," was all Roma could ejaculate. "Is this card really yours?"

"Mine! of course. Don't you know the name by now?" Bruce opened his blue orbs like an innocent chorister.

"NO," choked Peggy, impassioned, wild-eyed. "What a shame! Uncle Phil" (breathing deliciously between breaks) "called you Robert . . . and Bruce. How could

we know? And—because—we didn't want to hurt your feelings if you were only *Mister*, instead of *Captain*, we never said any name, and awfully hard work it was——"

Bowman, *alias* Bruce, gave a yell of laughter. He sat down incautiously and suddenly to indulge in glee on an "of England wooden chair," a thing of slats sticking out at strange angles, copied by some Kashmiri whose small brain knew nothing of equilibrium. If anyone tried its edge, that individual shot on the floor. Bruce Bowman, worse fool! leant back, and next instant his heels flew up, the chair toppled over, and he rolled in a heap of explosive mirth, upsetting a small table and shooting a jet of water from a flower-vase full on Peggy's dress. She fled, thankful for the pretext to escape to privacy, there threw herself on her bed (the only safe seat) to recover from this almost unbelievable joy overfilling her with a longing to shriek, shriek, shriek aloud; to weep—clasp her hands in ecstasy; disbelieve in its truth. Brief rapture. She sprang up to compose herself, assume the mask of a demure air and downcast eyelids, knowing her eyes shone irrepressibly in betrayal. Returning to the saloon, grudging now every minute spent away from sight and speech of her cousin—cousin! think of it!—as so much lost treasure, Peggy entered in the midst of a lively explanation as to his aliases from the young man.

"You see, my family always used to pronounce my name of Ralph R-a-l-f! Along comes my stepmother, a merry soul, and will have her way that it should be R-a-i-f. That I bore, but when she changed to Raffy and the girls, my sisters, took it up, I struck. My second name being Bruce I issued an edict to call me that, or they must abandon all hopes of ever seeing me at home unless no one else invited me anywhere—which was not likely. What about Robert? Oh, that's a regimental fancy touch.

When a man feels unusually waggish he calls me Robert the Bruce."

Then, perceiving Peggy—no, seeming to, for his eyes had not lost sight for half a blink of the curtain behind which she had vanished—he struggled up to offer her his latest trustworthy seat, an aged figure of S chair, some inches off the floor : probably, remarked Roma, the oldest existing European inhabitant of Kashmir.

" You've had to change your dress ; I'm so sorry," he apologized in an aside. " Not that this isn't pretty too. But the other—it was the Pindi frock ? I knew it."

Peggy gave an almost imperceptible nod. She had withstood remonstrances from Roma on the subject.

" *That* one ? But the tournament is a swagger meeting. Always put on your best to impress strangers, is my motto. If I possessed no more than what Pollyann calls ' Hitem, Titem, and Scrub,' my lightning-travel kit, I'd wear Hitem on a first public appearance."

But Peg pressed her lips into their tight, rosy curve, that would no more break than Cupid's bow.

Hey, but that was a merry evening ! The Brabble pair beamed so benignantly, and she so futilely observed five times to her prattling spouse, " Father, I don't wish to interrupt your stories, but do remember dinner-time," that Roma asked them to join her party. They accepted radiantly, only asking leave to contribute their stewing duck and green peas. Veraswami, who was acting kitchen chef with deep distrust of the Kashmiri cook newly come, rolled his eyeballs and showed his teeth in satisfaction when Roma hastily informed him of the influx.

" Got plenty everyting. Cream soup and prunes. I done made a honeycomb for side-dish. Got no marky-roni, so taking *warmy jelly* ; will do instead." (This meant a timbale with vermicelli.) " Get plenty knives and forks—other people's—all right." Whereat his mistress recalled the Indian servants' habit of borrowing the best

glass, china or silver from neighbouring butlers to deck a dinner-table. Guests also may recognise, suppressing a shiver of anguish, their most cherished flowers, grown in no other garden.

Blood-curdling yells from the bund interrupted this conference. Dashing out by the plank gangway, left ill-balanced, Roma sprang off it as Peggy sprang on, thus nearly upsetting the latter, who remained dancing up and down with outspread arms. The new khitmutghar rushed forward, faltering: "Sweeper! your sweeper, *huzoor*. Him killed—manjis kill him." He pointed a trembling hand towards a group of head boatmen who were brandishing their arms with ear-splitting shrieks.

"What is it? Veraswami, what has happened?" called Roma to that ever-faithful henchman, who had leapt first to witness the fray, unable to bear being out of anything of interest that might be going on. Back stepped the Ooti man, the first smile wreathing his face since he had heard of the ayah, Elizabeth's, disappearance. With his small head and bird-like eyes he looked like a sardonic starling.

"Only dese Kashmiri f*a*llows, mum. Dis boat's manji him wife cooking rice. Sweeper him come along and not see, so his coat touch pot. Woman she calling blue murder! (A smirk testified to vanity over that acquisition of English language.) "Manji him throw rice in water—no good. Tell wife cook more. Then go for to kill sweeper. First him call all the rest of manjis to help. Dey chaps shouting, shouting all the time, but not do much. I must get to watch soup. Sweeper him waiting there."

He jerked his head expressively towards a large plane tree. Beneath squatted the appointed victim, till his executioners should make up their minds as to the manner of his death. Meek was his attitude, but he grasped a chopper.

On such occasions it is a noble sight to witness how the

inborn sense of power rises in women of the conquering race. Her guests were all gone to dress for dinner, so Roma stood alone, except for Peggy behind, admiring though helpless.

She advanced with an air of authority worthy of the famed fighting queens of India, and only readers of history know their capabilities. She singled out her manji, called him by name with a peahen screech that she had never before suspected she possessed, which pierced the wrangling riot as lightning a thunder-roll. She stamped her foot, as gaping attention ensued, demanding to know how her hireling dared so insult his mistress.

What! For sake of his rice was her dinner and that of the sahib-log, her guests, to be spoilt? Peace. She would herself instil more carefulness into the offender, who had trespassed without malice. As to these other silly men, let them disperse at once and in quiet, or she would report them all for brawling both to their boat-tenants and to the dreaded Motamid durbar.

They heard and slunk away. The sweeper rose and salaamed with both palms touching in profound thanks-giving. And Doctor Brabble, putting his pink, clean-shaven face out of his cabin window, sang, "Rule Britannia!" in a tenor voice not much the worse for wear, beating time with a toothbrush. Behind him his spouse bleated unheeded: "Edgar, Edgar! Fancy singing in your shirt-sleeves!"

Hey, but Bruce laughed, hearing the tale, showing thirty-six flawless teeth! Sing ho! how gaily he thumped his banjo, encouraging Peggy to join in the chorus of popular ditties, whilst Brabble contributed a whistling accompaniment with really flute-like notes.

Outside, the low western sky was a rich red orange against which the poplar-tops were silhouetted as dark minarets and the heavy-headed chenars loomed as piles of rich masonry indistinctly descried in the deep shadows.

The risen moon touched to a gleam of silver the dome of yonder small temple, heretofore hidden in the dusk of the trees. Someone—Mrs. Drax or Mrs. Brabble—cried out admiringly, and those unsentimental men mocked, promptly crushed by Roma. What matter if by day one knew its glitter was due to a rough roofing of kerosene-oil tins? Now it was part of the dream-like scene.

They were sitting after dinner on the grassy bund, and presently, somehow, the young people strolled a little away, to listen to a native musician chanting Kashmiri songs in a cook-boat. He thrummed a queer instrument, a kind of guitar elder cousin, which in spasms of inspiration he upheld, pressed to his heart, or dandled, much as might a Neapolitan street singer. It was a prolonged song, the recitation of a romance to which the audience seemed prepared to listen for a squatting hour, as Bruce explained on returning. Therefore they also waited, it was really not half bad.

"Yes, indeed. It must have been quite interesting, and we ought to have gone too." Roma hastened to approve in her delightful way of setting everyone at ease. "I rather wish we had. Only, no!—then we should have missed some of Doctor Brabble's amusing stories."

"Ah, ah! Once it was my singing that gave my friends most pleasure. Now it is that—*and* my stories. When my poor voice goes and I have only my old anecdotes to fall back on, where shall I be?" whimsically lamented the little man.

"In your anecdotage," returned Roma. For the life of her she could not help it, still, "I wish I had not said it," she said later. "I only wish I could have said it," retorted Mrs. Drax.

But her victim was contorted with delight. "Ha, ha! Ho, ho! Where is my pencil? I must put that down on my shirt-cuff. Mother, don't send it to the wash without looking this time. She sent a shirt to the dhobie last

week, forgetting that I had totted down a priceless repartee, and it was washed out of memory—clean gone!" he explained. "Excuse my gaiety. It's my French blood. Brabble comes from de Braboulle. My ancestor, the last vicomte, came over in the Reign of Terror in a barrel, and became a dancing-master in London. Then we dropped the title and a few letters—England being illiterate—and here is your humble servant, plain Edgar Brabble." He left executing a caper, in tribute to the memory of his ancestor.

Together alone, Roma looked full at Peggy, whose eyes dropped, and threw up her hands. "WELL! If this isn't the surprise of your life, what more can be? But I'll say no more."

"Don't, dearest." Peggy got the two words out with difficulty.

"And what message from you shall I send to Phil—that incurable practical joker?"

"Tell him he is an adorable monster." And Peggy, blowing a kiss, fled.

CHAPTER XVI

TWO TOGETHER

TWO in a boat.

May sunshine filled the air with delicious warmth, perfumed with roses, thrilled with bird-songs. Down here low in the water-way between the upstanding reeds, all was greenness and flowing stream. So clear it was, that, looking down, one saw a veritable underworld forest in miniature through which fish glided; so swift the current that the tallest water-plants bowed their soft, weedy heads like green-tressed drowned naiads floating down-stream.

To right, the hot flanks of the hill crowned by the temple to Suleiman rose bare, brown and steep. Opposite, yet more redly scorched, rose the hill of the fort, its ancient walls outlined against a sky of clear, keen blue. And in contrast, as the boat was softly propelled to the plash of paddles towards the Dal lake, no words can fitly picture, no painter's brush could ever rightly reproduce, the intensity of vivid verdure, the crystal clarity of the scene on which these two gazed, the young man and the girl. Neither ever afterwards would forget it.

Beside them stood up stalwart innumerable ranks of green blades, an army of reeds through which kingfishers darted, burnished blue as the hovering dragon-flies. Around, under the low craft that now glided into a wider

space, there lay glassed in green reflection rival reeds and willows beneath a rival sky and sun-gleams. Opposite spread a patch of verdure on the shore, absolutely dazzling ; unbelievable. Both girl and man drew in their breath, feeling as if this must be a dream. It was unreal in beauty : a painted boat on a mirror ; faerie illusion. And they two together.

The girl was afraid of her own sense of bliss. She broke the silence first.

" Books say that this Happy Valley is the most beautiful land in the world, perhaps. And this month the loveliest of the year. And that in all Kashmir the Dal lake is the most beautiful part."

" And I am looking at the most beautiful sight in the Dal lake, and in all Kashmir, and therefore in the whole world at this moment."

Bruce was turned towards the nymph-like form so close to him, its tender curves almost touching his longing arm ; he looked nearer still at the dewy freshness of her face, with its luminous, clear eyes, now shyly downbent, the curve of those rose-red lips ; the indescribable virginal purity exhaling from this exquisite creature's whole being. It awed whilst it allured his senses. She was so pretty, so pretty, so young and sweet, his brain swam.

" *Peggy.*" Was that his whisper, or a breath imagined by both hearers ?

" *Br*——." The faint sound floated no louder than a sigh.

The man put out his strong, brown hand, palm upwards. Softly, timidly, a smaller hand drew towards, was laid in his. The man with a gasp of gladness clasped it.

" You understand ? " he uttered, low, tense, in joyful anxiety to make sure, quite sure. " It is for now and always ; for life. And I am a poor man—worse than poor—in debt. Oh, Peggy, darling, I ought not—but I cannot help myself—it is not fair to ask any girl to wait.

But will you; will you? I will save my very utmost, give up—oh, all sorts of things, till the slate is clean. And I will try for the adjutancy. The present man will be leaving soon, and our colonel is my best friend."

"I will wait for you till you are forty," answered Peggy solemnly. "Only—Oh, why not get m—— Why not face your debts together? I wouldn't mind sewing shirts till my fingers bled with pricks if only——" She stopped, glowing in confusion.

Bruce bent his golden head low and kissed those pink fingers, lingering on their cool touch. The four rowers behind could not see the sahibs, because of a *numdah* that Bruce had craftily bidden them hang from the awning, to give more shade. But a young Kashmiri boy did, idly watching the foreigners from a flat-bottomed boat, a fish-spear in hand. His bronzed body, white drapery and red skull-cap lent an attractive touch to the foreground. He was unusually clean.

Then—Oh, then these two talked, or rather babbled together. It would be unfair to disclose what was murmured. Besides, how can any other tell, when they certainly did not rightly know themselves? Only this happened, that Bruce drew off a heavy gold signet-ring from his little finger and slipped it on Peggy's left hand, choosing her third finger with deliberation.

This was the fifth day of their knowing each other. Both in confidence energetically repudiated the cold expression "acquaintanceship" as having a moment's part in their instant and thorough knowledge at first sight that each was meant for the other. And to chronicle exactly the doings of yesterday not yet related, the morning had passed in Peggy's chaffering and Bruce chaffing with an unending crowd of boat vendors, whose grip clung to the *Pink Lotus*' side-platform, whose fat bundles were outspread in a twinkling, and whose refrain from morn till eve was in mingled entreaty, "Salaam, Lady sahib. Me

stone-man. Me Mohamdik Joo! crystals, turquoise, beryl." "Salaam, memsahib! See 'broidery? cusshuns, table-cloes, bedaspreads." "Salaam, huzoor. Me Suffering Moses. Best papier mâché, ol' brass, earrings." "Salaam"—*ad infinitum.*

And that afternoon there had been a grand cricket match, with royalty stoutly strutting forth to bat, much fancying his prowess, attended of course by a youthful Kashmiri second to do the runs. Bruce, or Bowman, to give him for once his surname, covered himself with an unusual kind of glory when to a cautiously slow ball sent by England, Kashmir responded with a fairly good hit. The ball rolled towards the ranks of English spectators, Bruce with some action of shoulders and remarkably short steps pursuing it until——

Could Peggy believe her eyes? His toe caught and sent the ball several yards forward; next, seeming well-nigh exhausted with his efforts, he actually tripped and shot it a second time onwards to the spectators' very feet. Hot with inward shame, the girl stole a cautious look round.

A preternatural gravity sat on every face. A general muttered, "Clever, that. Good man!" Some one murmured, "Wonder if the natives noticed?" Then all clapped resoundingly because, thanks to Bowman's apparent ignorance of fielding, four runs were scored by the Personage in a huge white puggaree, a long black coat and gold shoes, up-curved.

"Now we shall not all be exiled," giggled an incautious little woman, seeming to say what everyone else was jocosely thinking.

The past evening at a Residency dance, Peggy, to believe Bruce, had fairly wiped the eye of every other woman or girl present; draped in filmiest white, starred and looped with shimmering chains of diamond-glimmering dewdrops at sight whereof arose a murmured tribute of,

"Paris—cost a fortune, my dear man. Don't talk of simplicity!" Peggy, so she was assured by her lover, created a veritable sensation. Someone, who had seen her at Poona, repeated the name of the Blush-rose, there given, that was now echoed. As to what turmoil of emotions were endured by Bruce between love's intoxication, mad jealousy of every other partner, delicious hope and deadly fears, well—Peggy sympathizingly entreated him to think no more of the horrid hours she herself had shared, until now they two were entered into mutual abiding bliss.

A crowd of row-boats paddled ahead of theirs, bearing their friends and most Europeans to a royal garden-party at the Nishat Bagh, perhaps the fairest spot on the Dal lake. Or so the great Moghul sovereigns seem to have held, and what better judges ever lived, seeing Jehangir reared the noble pleasure-house by the lake, with its verdant terraces rising tier on tier, flower-decked, its stately flights of steps that Nur Mahal, Light of the Harem, herself climbed to watch the clear hill-waters gleaming down their stone-pent channels or sparkling in tinkling sounds from the fountains.

This afternoon the water was loosed from prison as a holiday treat, gurgling, racing, shining to the lake; spouting up in glistening jets, conveying an exhilarating sense of motion and coolness combined to a mixed crowd of native-born and outland guests.

Among all present, only two were noticeable in the eyes of Peggy Lee. One, in courtesy conceded first place, was the royal bridegroom, gravely radiant in his scarce nineteen-year-old joy in life. His dignity and beauty of features were likely such as in Humayun rejoiced Babar's heart when seeing his eldest-born son, for love of whom the Happy King laid down his life. The other was—need it be told?—a tall, goodly man's form, that of her own Man for ever and always. Softly she moved, because

bearing a priceless secret that no vulgar gaze must suspect from dancing step or eyes like sunlit depths. Happy! Yes, so utterly, unbelievably happy, her heart lay still, brimming with happiness as if she might scarcely breathe lest some drop should spill.

But one friend guessed swiftly. Roma, after one glance at the softly-flushed face, contrived to move apart behind a rose-bush covered with innumerable sweetest flowers. Peggy drew instantly to her side, looked up with mute avowal.

"Oh—my sweet! So it is all settled. I am so, *so* glad."

"So am I," trilled Peggy, low as in a dream laugh. "Doesn't it seem too good to be true?"

Then others strolled up to exclaim with outcries on the beauty of Kashmir roses. But Roma felt a transient chill. She wished her beloved girl friend had not said that last sentence.

Mrs. Drax was near by, pointing out to Mrs. Brabble a quaint Eastern touch in the garden scene. Royal tents were planted on an upper terrace near the bandstand, and from these now defiled a line of servants carrying green-painted tin baths, plainly lately used, to the houseboats waiting below which had conveyed the Court hither. "Isn't this a land of contrasts? But so is all India. See there!"

On a lawn beyond the watercourse that flowed down the hill-garden, and in full view of the gay company, there squatted an aged man who had entered unchecked. He was industriously washing his shirt in a stone basin under a fountain, plainly thinking it were a pity to allow so much clear water to waste. Then spreading the garment to dry on the shaven lawn, he sat merely clad in a soiled dhoty, in serene enjoyment of the scene, as of the sunshine luxuriously heating his bare mahogany body.

During a strawberry squash, as Bruce termed the crush in a refreshment tent, whilst he was stretching

over lesser heads with plates of treacherous fruit and cream, an unctuous voice addressed Peggy playfully:

"So, little Miss Lee! How many more hearts did you break last night in that deevy gown? Or has your own been captured by the warrior bold whom you spent most of the evening with? Aha! is that not an engagement ring? May one see the crest of the lucky man, who seems to have staked his claim, as gold-miners say, and whose motto may be, 'B stands for Bowman, who shot in the dark'? I should like to be the first to congratulate you."

Owing to the heat Peggy's hands were ungloved, as is frequent in India, but with a brand-new self-possession she turned round to her tormentress, thereby shielding her precious ring from nearer inspection.

"How kind of you, Mrs. Blackadder, to take such an interest in me. This is a—family ring. And the crest is that of my mother's people."

"You—you *duplicious* young wretch!" said Roma, when she got a chance. "Do tell me, does he know yet about the cousinship?"

"*No!* Don't hint at it—promise. It was not the right time. That would have spoilt everything. He asked me for myself, *me!*—thinking we have next to nothing between us of an income. If he knows mother was a Bowman he will begin asking questions and guessing. . . . What a fool I was to tell that mischievous woman! Only he can't bear her. He won't go near her." Peggy began to look flustered.

"No doubt it will come right," soothed Roma. "Only, dear child, don't keep your archer in the dark too long. Men are not fond of mysteries."

Peggy dimpled and sparkled. "Just a little wee while of imagining our future of love and cheese. Then I will break the good news before he has to leave. Worse luck!"

The sun dropped in a lake of flame hue, nearly all the shikaras and nobles' barges were gone city-wards. But our flotilla of friends had agreed to enjoy a picnic repast and return by moonlight. So whilst the two lovers wandered on the higher terraces under the huge chenars, the rest sedately paced among the gorgeous roses, unweariedly admiring the mountains and lake.

Around the lawn-laid cloth nearly all tongues wagged merrily except those of the youngest two present. But the pair looked so unspeakably happy that the rest forebore to address them except sparingly, and then in softened tones, as if fearful of disturbing such unearthly bliss.

Roma amused her neighbours by an account of Pollyann's grievances on arriving to the twang of the tonga-horn. The experienced tirewoman declared Kashmir *that* altered—mostly, she did own, for the better as to roads. But when she came in before—that was with Roma's mother twenty years ago—chickens cost just one to two annas each. And now Veraswami told her they were "plenty dearer," actually *five*. It was going to be an expensive time, Pollyann gloomily foreboded, what with a cook at one pound a month of English money, unheard-of in former years, and as many tag-rag more servants and boat rascals as might trail after a regiment. Seeing her mistress entering the day's expenses, Pollyann sepulchrally wondered where was the good of "laying up a lasting memorial of *ra*ckless extravagance."

Mrs. Drax described next, as servants were the topic, her small boy's nurse, an Irishwoman whose husband was corporal in the Tipperarys, and who came up just to oblige and have a taste of fresh air. Mrs. O'Day hated "them leeches," as was her vigorous term for the shikara pedlars, who had the impidence to put their black claws this mornin' inside the windy of her bed-cabin houldin' out papyer mash inkpots an' she bath-ing Master David, till she screeched, "Purrdah, ye bastes." The narrator

added regretfully that much as she relished Mrs. O'Day's sayings, that good woman's brogue proved so fascinatingly infectious David was sedulously imitating it.

"Oh, have you seen David yet? He is such a darling! I always long to squeeze him," imparted Peggy in a whisper to her neighbour, Bruce. His eyes devoured her half an instant. Then he roused to contribute his share.

"Talking of this papier mâché industry in Kashmir, my sergeant asked me about it before I came up. 'Ave you 'eard, sir, of this Kashmiri invention, papyer mash? Remarkably light-weight and fine stuff, they say, so long as you neither 'eats it nor yet uses it for drink. My wife wants me to git some of it, but that troubles my 'ead, for cheap is not everything. In fact, sir, I feel fairly on the 'orns of a delirium.'"

Hopkins applauded with a heartsome guffaw. On arrival it was with him Bruce had stayed, for they were tried friends. Hopkins was considered a dashing cavalry-man, possessed the figure of a brickbat, a round O face and piggy eyes twinkling with good nature. He was held to have as much brain as a poached egg; did not trouble his head to define what was honourable, but simply expressed himself as to anything mean or unclean that it made him "beastly sick." For him life was "awf'ly jolly," and people divided into two classes, "rotters" and "rippers." Thank heaven! he knew far more of the latter. All present this evening were such, in his opinion. Excepting—well, he could not exactly place Mrs. Drax.

A rippin' good sportswoman, he and Bruce conceded, who likewise felt cool towards the masculine-mannered Diana. Had bagged a couple of panthers down at Dustipore, so she owned as a mere trifle. Two splendid tiger-skins hung in her houseboat. The Resident here knew through the Resident down there she was one of the best in their last tiger expedition, and shot like a man. "Like

a man," he repeated in the tone of a puzzled child. "Of course, she's a rattlin' good sort——"

"But too like a man," echoed Bruce. "She's going up after red bear soon. Will wipe the eye of everyone of us, pretty likely; still, she doesn't crow over it."

Talk turned, as always in the Happy Valley, to all that even every man no less than woman was hourly wasting of hotly-earned rupees. Commissions to buy ring-shawls or embroidered dresses for ladies in "the regiment." Old brass, which was the fancy of Mrs. Drax. In her resonant voice she told: "At Dustipore I sent into the city for curios. It's an out-of-the-way place, so there was a chance of bargains. A dealer came up with a sack-ful which he opened in the Residency verandah. His finest brass specimen, which he unwrapped with pride, was—what do you think?—a garden syringe from England."

When the laugh subsided, Hopkins's "Ha! Ha!" outlasting in vigour the Brabble "Ho! Ho!" she added contentedly, "But I got an antique skin-scraper; a cow on a scratchy brass base."

What about the famous Kashmir wood carvings? Most people went wild over them. Peggy yearned over a duck of a table all deeply edged with bumpinesses and lotus buds, as she now confided to Bruce in reality, but the company in appearance.

"Only where would it go at home?" she appealed to Roma.

"Where, indeed! It would make your Elizabethan tables rap out Shakespearian strange oaths. Queen Anne furniture would collapse and honest Chippendale certainly sneer at a thing of so little use that there is hardly enough flat surface left on the top to hold a specimen flower-glass. Kashmiri carving is well enough in workmanship, but needs good artists for design as much as English vegetables need good cooks!"

Hopkins's face never fell, it was too firmly round baked, but his lips screwed to a mute whistle and his eyes became parrot orbs at the pronouncement. From Bruce he understood Mrs. Wray was top hole as to fine things, according to what a friend said: wrote in the *Connoisseur*; and her home was chock-a-block as a meeting-house with "virtue and bigotry," they said. Hopkins suppressed making a guess as to the friend ungrammatically described as *they*. "When a man says that it means a woman. And when a woman says that it means a man. And it always jolly well means somebody whose name is too precious to be given away," he sapiently told himself.

"I've just gone a mucker over the biggest writing-table I could find for my Mater. How it'll ever get into her tiny flat in Queen Anne's Mansions, the dickens only knows. It has seven dragons at the back spitting out curly tongues and a knobbly edge, and I'm blest if she'll be able to write at it without getting her poor old hands dinted, now that I come to think of it!" he ruefully related later to his self-elected Egeria, seeking sympathy. And Roma earned his undying gratitude by going later to the workshop and altering the design.

Meanwhile Bruce, with a note of wonder, asked his sweetheart, "An Elizabethan home? I had no idea——"

"Well, it belongs to a cousin, really, and my old governess and I may have to turn out and go into a cottage."

Brabble likewise was holding forth on art in Japan. He and his wife went out to see the Cherry Blossom season there this last spring before coming on to India, and he was regaling his end of the tablecloth (for table was there none) with spicy recollections. These, carried away by a lively desire to give an individual flavour, he generally put down to Mrs. Brabble, who, good soul, opened her mouth aghast in contradiction. On such occasions she showed still beautiful teeth, but sat mute,

partly out of wifely deference, but also too well aware she could not have got in the least protest.

"Yes. She was most diligent in trying to pick up the language," the story-teller now narrated. "And had the—the audacity to try her phrases on any Japanese she met. So one morning at Yokohama, outside the hotel, she spied a little man lolling on the bund, standing like a crane one foot on the other. Know that Eastern trick? His clothes looked queer, and his face was liverish in colour, so that stamped him as a son of Nippon dressed in Western dittoes. Up she sailed, and by way of good-morning, said 'Ohayo.' The stranger said: 'I guess not—Kentucky!'"

Encouraged by the success this met with, and disregarding that poor Mrs. Brabble's mouth was opening and closing in hopeless disclaimer, her lord took a breath and started refreshed.

"But the best joke we had happened over some clothes that this good lady of mine gave away to a poor woman, the wife of her riksha runner. Now, now, my dear, it's only told among friends. What does it signify?"

For Mrs. Brabble, with purpling face, suddenly intervened with "Edgar! Edgar!" uttered in such heart-appealing accents that they hall-marked the tale as true. Habit prevailed, and the poor woman relapsed into submissiveness.

"They were—for I chanced to see the charitable gifts laid out along with my favourite old smoking-jacket I just rescued in time—they totted up—A straw hat with a bunch of black roses on one side looking sorry for themselves. A pair (as I believe you ladies call them) of corsets—anyhow, the stringamy things, laces are they? were busted, so that did make a pair of the article. And last" (the speaker lowered his voice and eyed his unfortunate wife with a comical assumption of terror), "white panties with frillies below, only their lace was just

a trifle ragged. Well, the poor family were most grateful, bowing like anything. Next day we were delighted at being asked to go to a funeral. No, no; native, I mean! Quite a sight. A daimio, a big swell he was, and it was real luck for us to get the chance. When we came down to the hotel door there was my wife's riksha waiting and in the shafts her pull-man. I rubbed my eyes, for his costume looked a bit out of the usual. She gave a squeal of horror. On his head the Jap was wearing her discarded straw hat with the unhappy black roses. Then came, of course, the usual low-necked vest, skin-fitting. But lower—hooray! behold her white panties, their flounces dangling just above his knees. And each of his calves was encased in half a pair of stays strapped on with a frayed pink lace." . . .

Everybody smiled or laughed at this account, made funnier by poor Mrs. Brabble's mixed anguish and sense of humour. But Hopkins vented a spluttering storm of hilarity that, tornado-like, just when it seemed ended veered round with fresh vigour.

"No," added the doctor reflectively. "My wife would not go to that funeral, more's the pity. I did, and enjoyed the spectacle."

The feast ended, an adjacent party lazily pulled boat-cushions nearer and joined in talk. These were two men in the Indian Civil Service, and their girlish wives, sisters and sworn friends with Peggy after meeting at Poona some three times. Therefore she must not slip away, much as Bruce pleaded in strangled ejaculations for a twilight stroll under the chenars while she yearned to consent.

When the moon rose the boats started. This time the swift current bore them townwards swiftly; besides the several crews took to racing each other, grew excited, paddling faster and faster, till the water splashed in silver jets, wetting rivals. Peggy cried out a little

frightened, being unused to boats, then was glad of her own tremors because Bruce's arm was quickly round her waist and his breath on her cheek. So their rowers were not chidden, until catching up with the first boat, in which sat Mrs. Drax and Roma, these memsahibs enforced discipline with authority, restoring order in the narrowing channel.

Someone persuaded the oarsmen to sing the lake songs, in praise to the local goddess, or to avert evil spirits of night. At the chanting all the other crews joined in. And though Bruce groaned that little wonder even demons fled, small blame to them! Peggy, less musical maybe, verily enjoyed the weird sounds, despite that Bruce's lips perforce touched her ear to make himself heard.

Now, under such circumstances how could any two young people talk—that is seriously? So Peggy demanded of her guardian friend later. To-morrow she could tell Bruce her happy secret.

CHAPTER XVII

FLOATING GARDENS

CAN any mode of journeying be more ideal than to glide on summer waters through sunshiny beautiful scenery surrounded by creature comforts and in one's own, if only temporary, home ?

So thought our Peggy as she twitched up a corner of the muslin window-blind beside her bed to espy willow copses, water glades among tall reeds, sometimes mud brick villages past which poling coolies pushed the doonga. Each of these individuals was exactly the colour of a polished mahogany table, but wearing far less than a tablecloth ; a tall fellow indeed sported merely a checked duster.

" Duski," one shouted, and a chorus echoed ; then after two or three more invocations to that heroic personage, the leader would invoke a dozen more saints or Olympians, " even the smallest help thankfully received." Babujungi and Ladichunga were secondary favourites ; finally all would conclude with a quarter of an hour's competition as to who could last longest over " Illa-lu."

Can Peggy find forgiveness in those yet to judge her conduct for happy, unbusinesslike dawdling this delicious day ? By rights, that is by laws unwritten, supposed to guide persons who can always see further ahead than other people, she ought to have summoned her light-

hearted "*financy*," as Pollyann dubbed Bruce, to a solemn council. Thereat he might doubtless learn between unbelieving surprise and staggering joy that his Amaryllis was minded to endow Strephon with certain appanages, lands, tenements, messuages. (These mystifying words had been presented for acceptance by her lawyers as valuable, and the rubbishy gifts still stayed dusty in memory's outer halls.) On the other hand, it was quite possible the splendid wretch might be more surprised than joyful and talk about his absurd conscience, thus wasting priceless minutes or even half-hours which lovers can devote to infinitely better purpose. In the end Peggy must triumph. But—by staving off all chance, however improbable, of generous wranglings till to-morrow, the desolation of near parting for three weeks must assuredly rapidly end all opposition to her inexorable will; all talk excepting sweet farewells that both could wish lasting until their next meeting.

So the damsel subtly thought—or supposed she did so. Thinking out the matter now seemed too superfluous. Oh, happy *now!*

Being young and lazy, Peggy slept late. For secret excuse Bruce's warning eased her mind that he "was out for a holiday and had enough early rising in hot weather dawns to satisfy any industrious ant." Thus, having got off soon after daybreak, a small flotilla of comfortable water-homes floated on the Dal Lake till they found moorings on a long green shore. Here spread trees on rising ground so majestic in huge girth, in wide-stretching branches, that the Nasim Bagh is famed for loveliness since the days of those most romantic of conquerors, the great Moghul sovereigns, who loved Kashmir as their lordly pleasure garden.

A water picnic to the summer pavilion of Jehangir and his Nur Mahal was the outing of the day, and all no sooner gathered ashore exchanging morning greetings

than they re-embarked on a cook-boat adjudged cleanest by Veraswami, who commandeered cushions and lunch baskets, while hustling the lounging boat-servants with airs worthy of a manager of the "Ritz."

There was Mrs. Drax, whom pity for Roma's plea of being otherwise the wearisome third, besides old friendship, induced to join forces. Also Hopkins, inveigled by Bruce to spend a couple of nights, so that his friend should not play that pitiable part to most male mortals but a pasha, of the Only Man.

"May I be allowed to bring my man, too?" asked Mrs. Drax almost shyly. "The fact is his nurse is in bed with—a—headache." That buxom dame it transpired was found with a whisky bottle under her pillow which she averred was put there full of hot water to warm her feet overnight and by some accident had affected her head. Pending the invalid's recovery to allow of her being sent to the care of the Salvation Army, Pollyann volunteered to perform that joyous nursery ceremony so dear to every true woman, of "bath-ing Master David."

Being in India, or Kashmir, it need hardly be added that not one of the men-servants but deemed it delight and honour to minister for the rest of the day to the "*chota* sahib's" amusement. David, who was a manly little fellow, despised his own bearer because of a propensity to cuddle and to use the endearment "ba-ba." He curiously liked the skipper of the *Pink Lotus*, a pious Mohammedan with a beard dyed scarlet to disguise Time's snows, whom his respectful fellows described in English as "him very prayable man." But David's preference was for the Indispensable. At every possible moment that could be snatched from his self-elected position of household controller, Veraswami stole forth at a sling-trot, to be seen later salaaming gravely to the child and hunkering, Indian fashion, to the height of his juvenile superior, when they talked as man to man. This noon he brought

a scone to David with the mollifying remark to Pollyann, who sat as proud as a hen with one chick, "It long time to tiffin. Scone not rich. I done gone bake him myself."

After two bites, David lifted abnormally long lashes with so affectionate a glance at his dark friend that Pollyann's suspicions were roused. As a piece broke off from the youngster's too fervid grasp she snatched it for inspection and glared reproach.

"Yon a scone! It's stuffed wi' coffee-cream. The child will be ill."

"No, no! Not ill," soothingly assured the impenitent and owing to natural causes unblushing baker of David's special make, detected at last. "Sweet*sies* very good for chil'ren. I got four."

David choked over his haste to invest the remains of his windfall securely. And Pollyann—who never had children—gave him with a generous air the morsel she so unjustly acquired.

Peggy's head was so full of a project that Bruce tenderly inquired the reason of her silence on the first suitable opportunity for an aside. Diffidently his Phyllis confided that the famed floating gardens of the Dal Lake occupied her thoughts. Could not he and she contrive to evade the tiresome Others (ungrateful Peg-top!) and spend a little while on one in a shady arbour, among the flowers? Bruce's eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. His mouth smiled almost into one near. At which signs of joyfulness in his pal, Hopkins venturesomely, though with a discreetly whispered shout across the boat, made inquiry. Bruce, in restored and significant gravity, put both hands to his mouth and yelled a whisper back.

"Rippin'," ejaculated Hoppy, looking jollier and uglier than usual, his piggy eyes blinking glee. "Just my idea of a happy afternoon. We'll come to one presently," he added in encouragement. The feminine

residue were not listening to this colloquy, being occupied in mildly repelling the onslaught of the usual pack of terriers belonging to every household or houseboat in India, who were intent on storming their laps without the least intention of remaining there.

The usual mild remonstrances were issuing from the fortresses. "Who invited you to come up?" "Now, this is my last clean frock and it will have to go to the dhobie."

David sat enraptured, being on best terms with his sporting adopted mother's nine canine pets. (In extenuation, it must be added, Mrs. Drax hired a native boat specially for a kennel.) Two of these were lent to the *Pink Lotus*, to ensure watchfulness by night and liveliness by day. But a fat puppy belonging to Hopkins' Irish brace specially captivated the wee mannie's admiration, to the point of a chubby elbow dug into Pollyann's guardian ribs.

"Oh, look! isn't it a duck?" "No, Master David; it's a dog." "Oh—but look! isn't it a lamb?" "No, it isn't. It's a dog." "Oh, but—but! isn't it a dear." "No, it isn't a deer; it's just a dog."

"(Your Pollyann is *un-payable*. She is just the antidote I've been longing to get for David after the spoiling everyone else gives him," imparted Mrs. Drax to Roma. "Something like limejuice in Italy or Spain to counteract too much oil in the cookery). Yes, what is it, Captain Hopkins. Only a——?"

"Behold!" exclaimed Bruce, with a rapturous gesture towards his lady-love—"a floating garden. Shall we land on it?"

"*That!*" returned the reddening, deeply-mortified Peggy. "Why, it looks like a workman's allotment gone adrift in a flood." She was indignantly eyeing a strip of reeds, kept together by intergrown roots, that, having been cut low and hacked from its parent bed, was thereafter towed to shallow waters by Kashmiri husbandmen.

The reed-bed was then taken in charge by their wives, who dotted the stubbly surface with mud-cones, planting in each a future succulent melon, or cucumber, with intentions that the youngster should send down roots to the water out of instinct and be self-supporting in a land where nobody works if they can possibly lie in the sun, or takes trouble under any circumstances. The garden is then tied to four poles fixed in the water.

"My ideal of the place on which to spend a 'appy 'oneymoon," chortled Hopkins. "Oh, had we some dear little isle of our own. Can't I see myself sitting on my own mud-heap, laving my feet in the translucent flood, whilst She under a chiffon pink parasol ogles me from her own particular pumpkin."

Bruce did not dare to betray his innamorata in words; he only laid his head on his knees as he sat on the deck, seeming taken with spasms till everyone clamoured for his blood or confession. "*Ask Her*," gurgled the traitor. At luncheon Hopkins distinguished himself by zealously pouring the salad dressing over several owners' plates of apricot-tart in the belief it was custard.

Everyone agreed the famed Shalim Bagh could boast a charming lake view suggesting memories of Como, besides a varied mountain background and umbrageous trees. Otherwise the dry fountains, empty tanks, were eyesores. Also there was little of interest in the long-deserted Moghul harem pavilion, beyond the noble black marble pillars, looted from a temple upstream. Lastly, there were bristling antlers in array used as chandeliers and mounted on wooden heads adorned with fierce moustaches; this latter beautifying touch to David's delight.

As with sweethearts' unconscious selfishness the Pair, as the rest styled them, had betaken themselves to the limited, sole, pretty precincts of the garden, the units of the party made a virtue of necessity by roosting on a stone parapet in a row.

Outermost of the line, Pollyann respectfully held her backbone upright, while David at her side was the object of her vigilant watchfulness. That little Benjamin had ruled that his hero, Hopkins, should come beside him, and now demanded information as to why Auntie Peg and Him were always away off.

"Because they are going to be married," said Mrs. Drax in her downright way. David's question had been addressed to Hopkins, who kept embarrassed silence.

Not to be done out of select converse with his playfellow, the youngster's clear pipe took up its querying chant again. "Why aren't *you* somebody's husband?"

Everybody waited, wondering what Hoppy might say in answer. He surprised them.

"Why. Because I once took a fancy to a dear little teapot, old chap. A pretty teapot with such a nice handle. But she thought I was only a coarse common slop-bowl."

"And zen," questioned David, "what happened?"

"What? Why, I was sent off to be knocked about in the pantry and rinsed out in the sink. She sat up on a shelf in a locked glass cupboard. Perhaps she has married a Sèvres cream-jug. I don't know."

"Never mind. I'll marry you," declared David, in an outburst of indignant affection, hugging his hero's leg.

The rest were silent, either smothering smiles or suppressing commiserating glances at Hopkins, because really his little fable sounded so like life. Pollyann, unswerving in rectitude, alone upraised a voice of stolid reproof.

"You leave talk of marrying alone, Master David. There may be many a slip betwixt the cup and your lip, unless you're unlike most of us. And I've seen enough of life."

"I expect you jolly well have," chimed in Hoppy, turning to her with sudden deference, perhaps because snatching at a welcome diversion of topic, yet also because

he rather liked the good soul. "Now what would you say was the worst slip of the cup and lip ever you knew; say the disappointment that was the most horrid?"

"I can tell you, sir. It was what happened to my own sister, she being a widow, as I've related to Mrs. Wray before now, who will bear me out," replied Pollyann with ready firmness.

Her lady nodded, but why did she also bite her lips.

"It came about like this, sir. My sister's husband was taken ill and died when in India, him being only a young soldier, but she on the strength of the regiment. It being cholera, next day he was buried, she, of course, following of him to the grave; when on the way back from the funeral what does a sergeant do walking beside her but propose marriage. And she had to refuse him!"

"Ho—Ah! of course," ejaculated Hoppy.

"Quite right. Most indelicate of him, under the circumstances," put in Mrs. Drax.

"It wasn't so much *that*, ma'am," explained Pollyann, in gloomy retrospect as to fate's pranks. "But that on the way going *she accepted a corporal!* Only to think that but for being in such a haste she might have been able to call herself Mrs. Sergeant."

Perhaps it was because Pollyann might have succumbed to Hopkins's flattering appreciation, or simply that she was pleased to pass judgment on him as a smart young orficer, "he and Miss Margaret's *finance* being just a pair" (in a tone of approbation), that the following incident occurred.

On returning to the Nasim Bagh late that afternoon, both young men after the day's heat as usual ordered their dressing-boys to have baths got ready in half an hour. Meantime Bruce, dawdling on the *Pink Lotus*, enviously exclaimed at the immunity of its household from flies. "Our *Sharp Ship* is simply black with them. They swarm on my face when I'm shaving. What?

'Swami and Mrs. Pollyann exterminate the plague here? I wish to goodness they would take me and Hopkins under their protection."

Pollyann overheard and bridled. Veraswami, indeed! No. She herself with mothering zeal would see to that—at once.

Presently, as dinner-time approached and all were dressing, a yell was heard from the *Sharp Ship* interior that could only have been given by Bruce, as all within earshot knew from its fox-hunter's earsplitting quality. A roar of ribald mirth answered as recognisably belonging to Hoppy. Heads were thrust out of every window or mat-hung aperture; apprehensive "boys" rushed to the rescue, when there followed a howl of fearfullest retributive woe, accompanied by shouts of "Bruce! Help! It's on my head—my nose—Oh, dash it, I can't SEE!"

"I—can't—get mine off," was answered between peal upon peal of mirth, sounding hysterical.

Both bachelors were late for the dinner this evening given by Mrs. Drax to all the friendly fleet. Hopkins was red-faced, with hair still wet as from immersion, besides singularly sticky in drab wisps. Bruce, less shy, yet seemed uneasy when seating himself on the dining-chair, all wooden ribs.

It must here be mentioned that on returning from the picnic the *Cormorant* was hailed, freshly moored last of the string of houseboats, its roof-deck occupied as usual by the beaming Brabble couple. Doctor Brabble, who of course knew "all about it," having hurried almost head over heels to help at the sounds of a bobbery, looked so delightedly knowing the womenkind longed to stick pins into his cushion-like proportions, maddened by his rosy-gilled, cherubic grins and his victims' pilloried silence.

"Look here, I'm going to split," burst out Bruce

suddenly. "Who was it sent Mrs. Pollyann with tangle-foot fly-papers to our cabins? It was the kindest of intentions, I grant." He stole a twinkling side-glance at Mrs. Wray, passing over Peggy, whose mouth shaped a rose ring of shocked maidenly disclaimer. "Because after taking my bath I sat down upon my bed, right bang on a sort of glue-and-mustard blister, and then you may have heard me screech Jimmy—Oh! Up I hopped and tried to tear it off, but the beastly thing clung fast. Hoppy, the brute, instead of helping, only rolled on his bed guffawing, laying his head on the pillow. And then *he* got it! There was another laid out that took hold of him, smeared itself over his hair and one cheek even. Poor chap! It's a shame to mock at a man in misfortune, but it served you right, you know it did, John Edward."

CHAPTER XVIII

A GREATER SURPRISE

THE rest were gone for the afternoon ; so a pair of lovers said to each other rejoicing. The world consisted these brief days of their two selves and—the others.

They would have a perfectly lovely uninterrupted talk ; would tell and ask a thousand things, small as seed corn, as sure to germinate during absence to a harvest of pleasant thoughts.

In her heart Peg exulted, thinking now was her chance of telling her great secret ; the time, place and loved one all together, despite Browning who sang the triad came never. But first let there be a little trifling, just a light prologue, until she felt the moment ripe to pour forth her largesse of glad overwhelming surprise.

" Tell me. When you were at Dustipore, the American missionary ladies used to give little roadside concerts, did they not ? We heard you kindly obliged also, sitting in a ring in the dust with them and performing on the banjo. No, it was not at the Residency the tale was told. A little bird whispered it at Poona."

Of course Bruce found out in five minutes of teasing and indignation the base informer's name.

" It was the one and only time I ever made a fool of myself there, for a mere five minutes. Riding back from cheetah-hunting with the Maharajah, I came upon

a bunch of lonely women drinking tea by moonlight. Little Sunbeam, as they named the only young one among them, called out 'Good-evening, have a cup with us?' So I had to get off my horse. Poor little soul! wasn't it romantic, she said, all her own idea. And the old ladies smirked, feeling as lively as kittens, though they were on a bare hillock in a dreary plain. The child, they said, had so much go, they hardly knew whether they were on their heads or their heels when she livened them up."

"You seem to have been quite friends with little Sunbeam. What of the concert?"

"Of course they started singing; American hymns, not the rowdy religious but a cosy, family, familiar kind. To be sociable I borrowed Sunbeam's banjo. As ill-luck would have it, who should prowl past just then but that pig-faced old gossip-wallah who prejudiced you against me before ever we met."

"I said she was like a smoked ham. How we two agree!" cried Peggy, delighted at the coincidence. "As to her tinned tattle we all voted it gone sour and unfit for consumption. Poor little Sunbeam! I feel sorry for her."

"How we two do agree," agreed Bruce ardently. And further agreeing on their agreement altered conversation.

Even Peggy was satisfied with the deep breath of admiration Bruce drew as he stood before the two photographs of Cowford that with proudly exulting heart she had pinned up in the saloon preparatory to—*telling*.

"What—an—utterly—ideal—gem," he intoned, dropping on the last word with weighty emphasis. "Now our old rat-trap I am fond of, and in my heart have envied my eldest brother for owning it—not that he cares a brass farthing for it either. But it is not in it with this! Oak floors and pannelling did you say?"

"Yes. But have you never seen a house like it? You must have—surely."

"Heaps in Shropshire and Cheshire," vaguely came in reply. "As a kid I was brought up at Shrewsbury for a time. And one—— They're all pretty much alike."

Peggy had missed making her point. But she returned to the attack from another quarter. "Our view is so pleasant! It looks down to the river—see! this is the ford that was once the only way of crossing except by the bridge in the town. Roma took this for me one day when the cows were standing in the water knee-deep. It looks so much lovelier too in the evening sunlight."

Peggy enthusiastically pointed to the second picture. Then wickedly dimpling, "How would you like to live there? But you would rather have your regiment and the trumpets and the horses and parades on the dusty maidan."

"Don't!!" exclaimed Bruce, with an intensity that startled the teasing girl into slight alarm as she looked at his face suddenly drawn and serious. "Heavens! How would I like to live in an earthly paradise?—for that's my idea of an English country gentleman's life in England. Why, even if I could only own a farm, I'd chuck the service like a shot, before it chucked me out as it daily does many a better man—just when he feels he knows his job thoroughly and has got some years of strength in him, but not time enough to take to new work. Listen!" he flung himself down in a deep seat and went on almost passionately, his forehead furrowing: "I never wanted to be a soldier. Farming was what I longed for from a boy. To tramp round even in the dirtiest weather and smell the ploughed ground and the hedgerows, and know the cattle, every beast among them, to sow and watch the crops, and reap—that's what stirs my heart. But they told me

there was no money in it. And my dear old governor had an offer for me of a place in a City business house; and got it on his brain. Well, to please him, I'd have done even worse; I stuck glued to an office desk till he died. . . . The week after, I volunteered for the war and stayed out in South Africa two years. They offered me a commission afterwards in the Indian army. Now you know all about it!"

Moodily the young man sat, staring at his boots.

Peggy softly dropped on an opposite creaking cane chair, pitying, yet fighting smiles, longing to—wondering was it the time, the place——

But any moment someone might look in, a teasing boat pedlar call through the window, a vendor of leather sandals utter his cry from the bank. And the cook-boat babies were sure to raise screeches that pierced one's ears, however many yards away, enough to spoil the delightsome ecstasies with which shortly her beloved should learn his future fortune, the realization of his boyhood's dream of ideal life.

She cast one inspiring, affectionate glance at the Cowford photographs, sensibly persuading:

"Don't think back. Let us look forward. Who knows what luck may yet be in store for you? And—it's our last evening until you come back in three long centuries of weeks. Shall we go out? It's so lovely when one gets away from everyone under those splendid trees."

"Let's!" Bruce rose as if shot up by a spring.

Now the great plane trees of the Nasim Bagh stand gloriously widespread in a park where the sward is green and close-cropped as an English lawn. And strolling through it, at the further edge looking out on the sunset open country there are some charming sequestered nooks to be found. As they went, Bruce, his bright hopefulness recovered, unfolded a new idea.

"Lots of men I know in the Indian service are either gone or going out to British Columbia, taking up fruit farms. Some families are starting patriarchal colonies there—the old man in the big house, and the sons and wives each in a Henry wing or a Robert wing. . . . Well, don't shudder. What I meant was that the climate is said to be good. Could you live on fruit? It would be cheap, and peaches might suit your complexion (they could not improve it). This is in earnest!"

The fire of his imagination crackling on the facts he rapidly caught up from memory, its flames leaped. He cried out:

"By Jove! it is earnest. We should not have to wait. Away from India and the hot seasons and the dust and——"

But Peggy, pacing beside him through the dappled sunlight and shadows thrown by the thick-foliaged branches, remained silent. Her rosy lips were compressed into the perfect bow he admired. More, save half her saucy short nose, he could not espy, for hats that year were worn, one may remember, round-crowned and pulled well over the ears, like an old-fashioned man's nightcap, or an Irish caubeen. Yet a sudden qualm of tenderness, pity smote him studying all the rest of her.

The daintiness of her cool white dress with its short sleeves and open neck, as was also then the fashion, showing the bare throat and rounded arms as yet unfreckled. So lissom youthful a figure, slim though with delicate lines of softly curving womanhood. Was it fair to ask this young loving being to toil for his sake as women toil and grow old and haggard early in the striving West; to roughen her soft, plump hands with cooking, washing, fire-kindling and what not chores? It was not fair.

"Fool, selfish fool that I am!" Bruce exclaimed, stopping short and striking his forehead, forgetful that

his last thoughts were as a river plunging underground for a while before returning to the upper world. "You could not stand the drudgery. Or if you could, I could not stand seeing you drooping and fading under it. Here in India, at least, most women can have any number of servants. They may be bored and weary in the heat, but there are the hills. Forgive me, pet! forget I even thought of such a future for you. . . . Why? . . . You are laughing."

"Because it is all so delightful, if you only knew. And you are going to know, sir, in five little minutes. Let us sit down and have a big, big, serious talk. . . . Here! isn't this a thymy hollow ready made for—for us?"

Peggy blushed enchantingly; patted the grass enticingly on which she had sunk, and sat nursing her knees, her hobble short skirt necessarily disclosing much shapely ankle and even slender leg. In mock solemnity she raised one finger, warning. "Prepare to hear what will be a great surprise! You may well round your eyes!"

Beside her Bruce plumped, nursing his knees also, his golden head bared to any sun-glints filtering through the shade of twin giant planes in front, past which one could see—not that these two cared to look yet—miles across the brilliant green paddy-fields below the higher ground of the grove.

"First of all, you suppose we two are painfully poor?" The speaker's eyes sparkled with roguishness. But her hearer's face changed to a quick, dawning suspicion that might turn to injured indignation. She had made a bad beginning.

"What I've got, or rather haven't got, you know. That's plain sailing. What you yourself gave me to understand was that your inheritance from your mother was a mere pittance, on which, moreover, your wish was

to maintain your old governess. What else have you up your sleeve ? ”

Then with blue eyes hardening and a ring of something approaching anger in his accents and reddening face : “ Don’t tell me you’ve deceived me !—that you are an heiress ! That’s the one fate I’ve always sworn to avoid, to be chained to a woman who would treat me as a kind of paid upper servant. I knew one like that, the rich wife of a major in my own regiment ; and if he offered a friend a glass of port she sniffed and used to say, ‘ Oh yes, certainly ; *pray do !* ’ till he and I felt as if we were sipping her life-blood. Peggy—out with it. Quick.”

“ No, no ; not that. Don’t look so—so severe, Bruce dear ! ” temporized Peggy, slightly dismayed. “ You will be so glad when you quite understand ; but it takes explanation, *really*. It concerns my cousin, who is—not legally, but still as a point of honour ought to be—the owner of my dearly beloved old home, and therefore not exactly perhaps a man of wealth but with plenty to spare. So, as I am nearest of kin and alone, they think—my friends do—that he ought to—will most likely—make me a proper allowance.”

“ How much ? I don’t see why.” Bruce picked up his soft hat and pulled it over his eyes.

“ How much ? Let us say enough for pin-money, to dress upon as a man would wish to see his own wife dressed ; enough, besides, not to oblige her to come begging to her husband for every half-crown to spend on chocolates.” This airily. Still hugging her darling secret as a child a hidden jack-in-the-box, rejoicing in anticipation of how her companion would jump when she let it go, Peggy was tremulously enjoying herself.

“ Humph. What sort of chap is this cousin ? Is he married ? Does he know you ? ”

“ He’s a dear ; a perfect dear. Not married. We’d never met, never heard of each other until—— But first

let me tell you about the will, and how he comes to be heir and *doesn't even know!*"

With eyes staring into the golden air as if seeing her pictured past Peggy Lee told how from a child she had played *at home* and been led to believe from her aged uncle's hints and even rare outspoken words that Cowford, which she so much loved, was destined to remain her home for life. Hers was so lonely a childhood; but the trees seemed to know her and stand as in protection over her, the lilac bushes loved her, and the bees—oh, without doubt. The dear old walls of the house, the pannelling wherein as a little girl she imagined grotesque faces or landscapes part traced by the veinings, all were her friends; when Uncle Pery was ill, therefore rather unkind, and she crept away to weep in secret, these consoled her.

Bruce heard, making no sign. He was longing she should tell this quicker, or some other time, and get on to the end; but he would not interrupt or betray impatience. Then it came to the decease of the aged relative—the will.

At hearing of that it seemed to Peggy almost as if the tense still figure leapt upright. Yet no! Bruce was still holding his knees together in a clenched grip, with whitened knuckles. In faltering tone (feeling so sorry for her past, black-gowned, immeasurably younger and lonely self of some months ago, silently creeping about the hushed house, timorously opening drawers hitherto closed to her, touching the dead man's papers with a half feeling that the deceased might come in any moment and resent her daring) Peggy told more; the more of vital interest. How *next* night——

Bruce nodded; he understood.

—She—Peggy—unlocking the desk which contained the dead man's passbook and such valuable papers as were not with his lawyer, the first object on which her eye

fell was an envelope addressed, "To my niece, Margaret Lee. To be opened after my demise. Private and confidential." How awed she had felt breaking slowly the thick cover, reading by a dim lamp the contents. She now knew them by heart, impressively recited its gist excepting—ah! this was a master stroke of tender strategy, keeping the crowning disclosure to the last, glorying over the amazing suggestion that she should play the sovereign and herself propose, as also the name of that distant cousin whom the old man's pride of descent tardily thought of as heir, yet in indecision left reparation or alteration to be made by the sense of honour in a weak girl.

"Vacillating old duffer!" growled Bruce. "More than a trifle balmy, I should say. To bring up a niece as his own child expecting every comfort if not luxury. Then to jolly well tell her she's never to know peace of mind if she sticks to her rights—defraud her from the grave! . . . And your precious cousin accepts?—What a hound!"

"But he hasn't exactly. . . . You see, he was abroad, and we, Roma and I, have been hunting him half over the world, the elusive man. . . . He doesn't even yet know rightly."

Peggy's excitement blurred her wits, though her eyes danced to her heart's gay measure. She dimpled, glowed, showed milky teeth in an adorable smile, as she leaned forward till the witchery of her nearness reached the man's senses as an intoxicating cloud of fragrance.

"Would you like to hear the name of this lucky cousin? Would you—? Well then, my uncle's name was not Lee but Bowman, and my cousin is called *Ralph Bruce Bowman!*"

Bruce's facial muscles quivered slightly as under an utterly unforeseen shock; then stiffened to iron impassiveness. He sat silent a few seconds like a rock, his blue

eyes focussed on Peggy, yet betraying nothing of the whirling thoughts suddenly set going like machinery roused at the press of an electric button.

"Oh, speak! Say something. Swear!" cried Peggy, with divine petulance. The surprise was not coming off just as she expected.

There came slow words.

"Are you sure there is no mistake? Can I see that letter?"

"Here it is. I brought it—though not supposing you could disbelieve *me*," pouted the childlike, joyous presence.

With business-like concentration, assumed as it were a coat of mail, Bruce unfolded and steadily perused the letter, Peggy's gaze hovering over him.—*Ah!* he started—that was where his name came. He recovered himself; paused on it, seemed to turn to—to steel. . . . (How queer men are! No woman would thus take the news of a fortune.) . . . There! his stern lips were unclosing.

"You said the name was Ralph Bruce Bowman. It is Ralph and an initial—might be R."

"That's only Uncle's shaky writing. B and R are as like as two hands, one turns left, one right. Oh, you do make me so impatient! You are spoiling half my pleasure."

"I am sorry. But this is a most important matter, and needs thinking over." Bruce carefully refolded the letter, and placed it in the vanity-bag that swung from its mistress's arm. He remembered wondering why she carried it that afternoon; usually she hated any such impediment to utter freedom. Then, rolling over on his side, he lay full length, pulling his green soft hat over his averted face.

"Tell me everything. What do your lawyers say? The place seems legally yours. Don't you want to stick to it?" The questions came in tones stifled by the covering mask.

At that Peggy realized that a slow-witted male being could not intuitively know all that had simmered and worked in her brain for weeks, until her swift resolve of renunciation had become something to be faced without undue shrinking, not as at first bowed under as a plant is borne down by a storm-gust till its blossomed head lies in the mire.

She told all of her mental troubles undergone—fully. What need to withhold *now* her craven hopes that the unknown cousin might turn out to be—married or undesirable. How her heart at that tantalising imagination bounded at the thought of being set free, free to possess her cherished Cowford, with a conscience void of speck.

A muffled sound came from the recumbent figure.

"What is that? . . . Is there anything more you want to hear? Oh, but what more is there to tell? All my agonisings are over. You are you! And Cowford is yours—and you are mine." Peggy fairly chanted the last sentences, like some rejoicing primitive maiden raising her bridal song.

"Tell me—" Bruce half raised his head and spoke more plainly, though still indistinctly, half-way dropping his head again on mother earth. "Supposing I had been some other fellow—after we had been together those first three days—and that you knew I was over head and ears about you, while you—you've owned you cared for me from the first. What would you have done then?"

"Oh dear! Must I answer?" Poor Peggy's voice quavered at the memory. "I will confess now, that terrible question kept me awake *crying* at Neidu's hotel, yes, only the second night! There's a sop to your vanity, Master Bruce! At last, towards daybreak, I resolved to give myself one more day to see; then, if I felt—caring—too much, there was nothing for it but to run away."

"*You couldn't—face—poverty with me?*"

"Oh, my own dear boy, why ask all these horrid questions now? If you want the utter truth, I never meant to put things to such a test. We came to India cousin-hunting. If he was fairly nice and would accept me with Cowford, then I meant to take him for better for worse, and bear with him all my life long. . . . Darling Bruce, you can't grasp how cruelly hard it was to think of giving up everything. It seemed as if a hundred roots of me fastened into Cowford earth would be torn up, each hurting; and as if creepers of mine, affections, were twined round the whole place, the old church and graveyard and the cottagers and village people, the school-children and old cronies. If they had to be torn away, part of me would wither and die. . . . Imagine pins and needles pricking all over one's soul! . . . But it's not to be!" Peggy's eyes, face, voice quivered between laughter and tears. "Why should we two waste this happy short time left in discussing trials we have not got to face?"

"Because"—Bruce rolled over, raised himself to a sitting posture, and glowered with eyes like hot coals —"*I am not your right man!*" His voice boomed hoarsely. "He is my namesake cousin, who told me of once visiting his old bachelor relation, and being sent away in disgrace. The initial *was* R. His name is Ralph Rowlands Bowman. For a small fortune left him he took on the name of Auldjo."

Speechless Peggy sat. The blood rushed from her heart to her brain, to her eyes that stared suffused, then the tide flowed back to her heart that hammered hard. Presently she felt cold, and through dulled ears heard vaguely terrible words of a man's wounded pride, faintly saw his convulsed face, striving vainly to control his passion and misery.

"Yes. My colonel, Auldjo, whom you met and—so a woman who was on board ship told me—you—I hated her for saying it—you, she said, tried to attract. She said

more—at the time I felt like throwing a glass of claret-cup in her face; she tittered and cackled that you had a tremendous flirtation with a young fellow called Bowles, till, as he hadn't a halfpenny, you dropped him for the bigger prize."

The unhappy girl, late joyous as a newborn butterfly, opened and closed her lips, stunned. She put her hands to her head. Then feeble words trickled in self-defence. . . . "No; no . . . It was he who . . . Mrs. Blackadder told . . . she hates me."

"The woman is a consummate untruth-teller, no doubt," went on the merciless judge. "Still, no smoke without some fire. But it's not my business."

Then, springing to his full height, and seeming to tower in awful majesty of moral superiority over the cowering, stricken small bundle of nerves and misery:

"Don't despair. Take my advice. You can still try for Auldjo. He's not engaged, so far as I know, and may accept your—terms. So you can keep your fortune."

A wail burst from Peggy's riven heart. She flung out her arms that groped in air towards him, but, "Don't—don't!" was all that her throat could frame.

"Don't *what?* I'm not blaming you," came in dreadful distinctness. "You have just told me that you would never have allowed yourself to love—or, anyway, to engage yourself—had you known I was not the real Simon Pure. So it is not a binding matter!"

A terrible silence ensued. The white form seemed to shrink smaller; it moaned. Out burst the man's passion, blazing for a moment.

"Oh, my heavens, girl! Why could you not have told me sooner—before I held you close against my heart, before I kissed your lips? . . . Well, it's over! You are free. Good-bye for always."

Bruce turned and sprang down the grassy slope past

the chenar trees. A fairly wide irrigation canal lay below. He took it in a leap. Then, not once looking back, he strode straight forward through the paddy-fields into the sunset, seeing nothing, stumbling along the narrow ridge-way, possessed by demons.

CHAPTER XIX

"I VERY GOOD MAN"

IT was late for Veraswami, butler of the *Pink Lotus*, as the Indispensable now proudly caused himself to be styled by all underlings, besides his equals in caste and occupation on the river; late, that is, for him to be taking his evening stroll and the dinner-table decorations of coloured rice, his favourite task, still to be arranged in patterns. But dinner was a belated meal these idyllic days on board the houseboat. The lady-log at least set no great store by eating. Besides, he had been forced to wander far afield to find an unrifled plot of sweet-scented white iris to fill earthenware jars on the *Pink Lotus*' poop and wild roses to deck the swinging baskets round its sides. Other boat servants were abroad on the like errand.

Veraswami was skirting the grove homewards, satisfied at the sheaves of fleur-de-lys wherewith he had laden the small boy, his fag, when the Hindu stopped softly.

His eyes espied a figure that seemed walking straight to the setting sun, and even though far off he recognized a sahib. Like a revolving flashlight the white eyeballs rolled towards the grove. Then, gripping the singing lad by his shirt-collar, the great man twisted the chokra's head towards the river with a ferocious "*Juldi jao!*" Such a surprising change in the gentle Southron, generally too indulgent to children because of his own at home, had

the hurrying effect desired. It was fitting the Indispensable one should know things, but not that cook-boat gossip—which is like fire in stubble—should proclaim as far as Srinagar and up and down the Jhelum from its source to the frontier how a Miss-sahib leant against a tree beating it with her hands in misery as might any low-caste woman.

The sun set and a chill amber lingered westwards. Next subtly appeared a rose-yellow afterglow, deepening to carmine behind the darkening trees, and with it returned row-boats, bringing back inmates and stir to the empty Noah's Arks moored along the bank. Laughing voices calling good-evening to each other mingled with the crooning of ring-doves and the immense under-shrilling sound-flood of the tree-crickets which many hearers hardly notice. All nature, reviving after the day's heat, was hymning its evening praise in restfulness and peace.

The waiting figure of the Indispensable received cushions and aided Roma out of the shikara belonging to Mrs. Drax. He followed close at her heels.

"Missus going up to wood fetch Miss-sahib?"

"Certainly not. I have to change for dinner in five minutes. Isn't she in?"

"Not in. Missus going find her? I tink better go"—insistently.

"(Really, this is too officious!) What *do* you mean? The captain-sahib is with her and will bring her home in time. Put back dinner."

"Him gone—far away. Not back. I been two times to see. . . . Please, missus, coming. I show way."

Roma looked up quickly to meet full a compelling glance of entreaty, and note black hands wrung unconsciously.

"What is the matter?" she asked, in a quiet, lowered tone.

Instantly the hypnotizing orbs changed to glass balls; the reply was impassive in respect. "I not knowing.

But—p'raps—bobbery." The last word seemed breathed vaguely to air.

Dusk succeeded the afterglow swiftly. It was almost dark in the hollow under the twin giant chenars where lay something white: something that lay still as if unconscious, yet not sleeping, for at times it shuddered.

"My child! My Peggy! My poor own, own dear!"

Loving arms were round the form now, raised the prone head as to a mother's lap, murmured soothing and hopes. "No matter what it is, don't grieve so. He will come back."

"Never! never!" Peggy writhed upwards, rolling her head in misery on the friendly bosom. "*You* are all that is left to me. I have lost him."

Nearly two hours later, in a small yet dimly-lit cabin, Peggy, who seemed to have been lying in stupor, twitched, raised a dishevelled head and startled the watcher at her side by a low wail.

"Roma! He's leaving to-morrow. *Go to him!*—to-night; now! Talk to him. . . . Oh, put it in your own nice way. . . . Tell him I'll give up all—everything for his sake."

The hearer fought back an instantaneous repugnance at the mission. It was late; the young man would never come if sent for, would return polite excuse. And the alternative would shock the Eastern minds residing in bodies now seated round camp-fires on the bund, smoking by turns the hookah.

"I'll go, dearest, I will do my best."

Even as they consulted came the plash of paddles; passed; receded into the night.

Peggy bounded to a sitting posture; an unreal Peggy, a creature galvanized to painful caricature, distorted in expression, shocking to loving, pitying eyes.

"He is gone!" she whispered hoarsely, stertorously.

Both women knew it was true.

* * * * * *

On the river bank a ghostly white figure listened to the departing swift strokes of six village coolies whom late that evening a seemingly dead-beat yet authoritative sahib hired through the medium of the head-man to row him quickly in the darkness to Srinagar.

The Indispensable was sorry for the women-log, but a man feels for a man. He grasped an emptied soup-bowl in his hand, recollecting pleasurably how gratefully after it was drained a deep young voice uttered, "You're a good man, 'Swami."

Rather uneasily he hoped that neither missus nor young missus would ever learn his further deeds of charity. (Pollyann had the eyes of a hen-kite.) Yet he had salaamed to his usual evening dismissal, after which a servant's time is his own. And could professional pride endure to witness boots, bottles and shirts being rammed indiscriminately into a suit-case without taking a task in hand that is not suitable to a high-born sahib?

Feeling virtuous, he crept soft-footed as a jungle creature to the upper deck, where he lay under the little awning o' nights, and sought his blanket.

"I very good man," blinked sleepily this misguided heathen to the stars.

CHAPTER XX

WINGS OF A DOVE

"O THAT I had wings like a dove, for then would I flee away and be at rest."

How many millions, one wonders, have echoed that human heart-cry, have taken sad comfort in knowing that their desperate longing to escape from some scene of misery was felt and voiced by the poet-king so long ago.

Peggy shared in it now. Now she learned what it is to toss on her bed through the night and only sleep from sheer exhaustion when the grey light steals through the curtains. And how crushing is the sense of waking, dully aware of the horror of some overhanging heavy trouble; yet at first to stare half-blinded at familiar objects, unable to recall what it is that ails one. Ah! then——

Then comes the following moment of acutest anguish. The burying a convulsed face in a pillow; the mute outcry against fate; the dull revolt against the long day to be dragged through before the shrouding veil of night. "Where would I like to go to?" echoed a listless voice. "Oh, what do I care? Anywhere. Wherever you like, Roma. You and Mrs. Drax, as you say she wants to come. . . . No, I don't dislike her joining us. You like having her, and all I ask is to be left alone. That—and if you don't both mind, somewhere quiet and restful."

After a pause of compassionate affection, of querulous impatience at being its object, there followed: "Isn't there a place up the river, as far as the boats can go? And a camping-spot beyond that Colonel Auldjo spoke of—*Archibald*, or some silly name like it?"

"Atchibal. Yes; we all want to see that. Why not now? Let us go." Roma's voice was carefully prosaic. To quivering nerves serenity is vexatious by pure contrast, but any show of pity can be maddening. The once sorely-tried woman could still remember how her wounds then pained.

There followed three days of slow towing up-stream in three floating houses. The distance by road was a day's mere run by motor-car. Here the Jhelum loops so extravagantly near Srinagar that the famous Kashmiri shawl-patterns are said to have been copied from its curvings. Also the down-flood races splendidly swift, discoloured by snows melted daily from the grand peaks ranging all the valley's length in the rear of greener, nearer hills.

Now the joys of river-life depend both on the weather outside and inside. Sunshine increased to grilling heat in the boats those days, but in Peggy's heart all was cold, black, bare winter. Indoors she stifled; so gloomily flinging a hint of headache, always bettered by fresh air, she tramped for hours ahead of the rope-harnessed, tugging coolies on the bank, stumbling on the narrow track edging the young maize where herds of cows made divergence among earth-clods and thistles a frequent necessity. Only between high noon till three o'clock could she be coaxed within, when tiffin and the men's brief meals called a halt for the cook-boat to come alongside.

"She may get a sunstroke, Roma," warned Mrs. Drax.

"N—o. They are out of fashion in India, Doctor Brabble says, and enteric is all the rage. He was not

laughing : and certainly I am not. No one knows why it is so, but one hears of next to no sunstroke cases nowadays, and only frumps wear topees in the afternoon. . . . But what is she thinking of, poor child ? "

Could Roma have known what was going on inside Peggy's brain, she, like its owner, would have distinguished nothing clearly ; only brooding darkness and endlessly whirring, recurring useless argument ; like millstones grinding with only threshed-out straw continually thrown to their unending revolution.

" So few days together. She can't suffer long," Mrs. Drax would suddenly ejaculate. Diana knew a certain amount as to the breaking-off of the engagement on which she and the Brabbles so lately offered hearty congratulations.

" So one would think," sighed Roma, both women recalling inner memories of brief married years, then of sorrowing for the loss of their beloved through death —or worse, far worse. Surely to be bereft of one's husband and of the dear child each had owned (though in Roma's case only for some five sweet months) was as a long, crushing illness compared with the dagger-prick of losing a seven-days' lover.

" Still, one never knows," added Roma, with the intense love of justice she cherished.

These two friends spent all day in each other's company, since Peggy plainly fretted at the least well-meant attempts to draw her into conversation. Diana's boat, the *Whale*, was a huge, shabby tub, chosen by its tenant because during rains David would enjoy plenty of room to play about. Its little ruler had been nicknamed Jonah by his friend Captain Hopkins, to Pollyann's distress at " making free with the scriptures," and to her additional horror Jonah used to shout gleefully, " Mummy, I want to be frown up," whenever wishful of landing for a run on the bund.

All went ashore each delicious morning when from seven to nine the freshness and sweet warmth of late May made the sense of living pure joy. The elder women and the dogs kept behind, not to interfere with the lone girl ahead. The fun began with most of the terrier pack chasing sheep, pursued by Diana with long strides and a whip. Then Roma chased David for a kiss which he stoutly evaded unless honestly caught, which, seeing his mother and Pollyann were declared to be sanctuaries in the game, made matters really difficult for everybody, as they were dodged round with screeches, run into as by a small battering-ram and mercilessly mauled. Even when caught the little man fought and ducked, only giving in after driving a hard bargain; generally, "Will you tell me a story?"

"What's inside that?" asked Roma the third morning, showing proper interest in the contents of a pill-box clasped in a chubby fist.

David pulled a ferocious face. "A panther!" He made pretence to let the concentrated panther loose, whereat she retreated in proper affright.

Mrs. Drax explained in an undertone: "He has panther too much on the brain. Some time, when we two are alone, I will tell you why, and the story of how he was left to me—my little son."

The evening hours from the sun's descent until setting and afterglow were likewise exquisite, as the gleaming brown river ever raced under banks vividly green with mint and water-plants haunted by white butterflies. Sometimes came shady reaches where enormous plane trees overhung the river, their roots like boulders, so that hauling coolies vainly attempted to swarm round the slippery trunks. It was all a mahogany-hued arm could compass to pass the tow-rope by finger-tips to his mate's outstretched hand as both natives clung like woodpeckers to the sides of one huge grey bole.

Often a fisherman, naked as Saint Peter, was casting a curious net, like a deep bag strained to a bent stick. His shoulders gleamed dusky-red as he brought up his haul of one mean whitish fish. As always, a woman squatted in the stern of the flat brown boat—herself all brown of face, her head-covering and scanty garment drab. How long ago had it been white? But large silver ear-rings and heavy bracelets made the impression that so often the sweeper-women and others of the "untouchables" give, with their many bangles and free carriage, that here was a princess masquerading as a beggar.

Pampur was a dream-village, where above and below the bridge with its faggot-like piers a dozen views rivalled each other; noble trees were mirrored in the river; brown houses on the bluff seemed the more picturesque for the craziness of their walls, mud-bricked below the wooden galleries and windows, where carved shutters or paper panes recalled European middle ages.

Here the boat manjis hurried ashore to lay in a store of the famous large biscuits with corrugated tops so like the Italian dinner-rusks and only made here and by the priest's family. Did some travelling Jesuit missionary long ago wander hither and leave the recipe with a friendly Brahmin? Perhaps.

Herds of brown or black small cows came to water at evening hour, a boy calling them on his pipes.

On again, up by barley-fields, pasturage and willow groves, winding, hauling. How the bulbuls twittered and the turtle-doves in thick trees burbled unceasingly. Peggy put her hands shudderingly to her ears alone in her mat-roofed boat at the sound. Muslin-frilled curtains and Kashmir embroideries pinned on the walls faded from her ken, to short sward and twain great trees, heavy-branched overhead, in which ring-doves cooed and cooed, whilst beneath a white, girlish figure lay prone in anguish of love spurned, rejected.

Meanwhile, Roma Wray, seated on the roof-deck of the *Pink Lotus* amongst geranium-pots, heard blissfully the coo-coo-oi-cooi, unceasingly repeated, smilingly murmuring to herself, "'The voice of the turtle is heard in the land.'" The great love-song of Solomon echoed in her heart with the spring evening, her pulses were singing in tune with all renewing Nature; happy, happy fancies ever softly unfolded like flower-buds, hovered as young dragon flies, fearful of the joy-flights their wings fluttered to dare. A beautiful woman she was, seated there, chin on hand, gazing at the mountains with shining eyes, yet seeing more, far more than their long range of furthest snow-crests, here white, there dark in shadow. The day-dreamer's glance dropped a little. The inaccessible heights appealed less to her meditative fancy than the great nearer hills so warmly brown, steeply scored as by glaciers, their ridges and crests in curious contrast velvet-green.

"Why does grass grow where screes should be, and on crests that by rights should be bare?" demanded a prosaic voice, and Diana's head appeared above the ladder. "They are queer-coloured mountains: just like brown- and green shot silk."

Roma started, her soap-bubble visions burst, their prismatic colours gone, whither? She was half vexed, for the remark was so absurdly true. The hills were—but no! away with other people's ideas that would displace one's own, very own fancies and thinkings.

"I've come to know if you care to take a walk with the dogs."

So saying, Mrs. Drax climbed higher, thoughtfully studied Roma, took an opposite chair, and in a totally different key made the sudden remark: "You do look handsomer than even seven years ago. Of course then—— But now, thank God! you are happy. You don't mind personal remarks from an old friend? . . .

That's a comfort, for I want to say you give me the impression of a woman surprised by an unexpected love affair that thaws fountains she thought long sealed. Do tell me—was it Bruce Bowman ? "

" Good heavens, no ! That wild hawk of a boy ! Besides he blazed undoubtedly, if like straw-fire, for Peggy."

" I know. But she would stand small chance against you in real rivalry. Youth is a splendid asset. But hers is mere prettiness that may soon fade. And your features are chiselled to last you through all life's wear and tear of sorrow and sickness. If I had had your face and intellect, heavens ! how men must have lost their heads over me. I should have been a very devil. Why are not you ? "

" You would not. And you know well why I would not—even if I could. Come. Hark to your pack howling."

So they took the dogs a run in the changing evening lights, watching the snow-silted peaks rising and falling in gentle undulations away and away, in sunset faint brightness that grew grey-cold in the lingering northern twilight.

As later all three women sat round the *Lotus* dinner-table, another houseboat glided past in the darkness. Its saloon was lighted up brightly, revealing a convivial party. Mrs. Blackadder, with both elbows on the table, was ogling General Fyerflaught, who was draining a wine-glass. His wife, thin, be-scarved and bored, eyed the pair askance. They looked across, recognized the inmates of the *Pink Lotus* and Mrs. Blackadder waggled her finger-tips in the modern infantile gesture unknown in the eighties and that would have been sternly put down as silly affectation by Victorians.

" That woman again ! " Peggy flushed and her tone bewrayed her.

" Do you dislike her so much ? " asked Mrs. Drax

downrightly. "Many people do—mostly women. But she has good in her. She sat up with me once two whole nights on shipboard when I was ill going home alone. Nobody is all black or all white."

The other boat glided past before she ended. Roma only commented. "How late they work their coolies. Ours look dead-beat after their fourteen miles' haul, and some are asleep on the bank already like corpses. Those people must be pushing on to Bijbehara, where we mean to tie up to-morrow."

"This river is like Bond Street. There is no escaping acquaintances," snapped an almost childish voice.

That night at eleven o'clock Roma Wray, the only soul sitting up still in the boats, though perhaps a disconsolate maiden was also wakeful, gazed out from a window-bench into the warm darkness. Below the Jhelum flowed by quiet and swift, only a faint gurgle sounding under the vessel's stem. The sky gleamed glorious with constellations; one brilliant lone planet shone reflected in the water as bright as a street lamp. Black loomed the big opposite trees, dark their reflections in the steely, star-set flood.

Noiselessly Roma's lips formed: "The heavens declare the glory of God." Her thoughts strayed all too soon, declined earthwards, centering on herself awhile, but still attuned to thanksgiving. How much, much of good and happiness life still held for her! And years ago in India she had almost arraigned her Maker for wilfully breaking her as a potter his ill-shaped vessel; all but felt she could curse God and die, sure that no worse hell awaited her tortured self on the other side. And now——

Still feeling young, strong, able to help and cheer others, as this dear sorrowing girl, so near, whom in childhood her, Roma's, affection had alone sustained. Still finding always fresh interests in the neighbouring crowd, in new studies, in science, above all in Nature. Still pulsing with the joy of being alive on earth, besides dawnings of life

ahead growing ever if yet faintly clearer, suggesting glorious steeps upon steeps, rosy deeps beyond deeps. . . .

And now—just now—as her friend so shrewdly guessed this evening with woman's sixth sense of intuition, Love, to Roma's own awed astonishment, nestled in her heart once more. It was as if in a long-deserted twilight garden, its mistress, straying, came upon a blossoming rose-bush.

Oh, not that *he* had said anything outright on board ship nor yet in Bombay. Only this: when alone together at the station for one brief minute—Peggy's attention was just then taken up with the groups of native women and babies all seated on the platform in brilliant-coloured groups, so fascinating to new-comers—

"If I run up to Kashmir this summer, I could take a doonga and meet you—both—on the river if you would not mind."

His voice had said "both" but his grave, true eyes said just "*you*." And "*you*" again both eyes and lips emphasized when humbly asking the leave to join which she did not "mind" granting. How she gave the craved consent—by glad eye-flash, or mere words so gently murmured he bent his head to catch the boon—she now did not know. But he had known, and his straight form squared itself more upright, his tone rang clear as a bugle and joyous when their train glided away.

"You look quite glad to be rid of us," Peggy had pouted. At that he laughed: a good laugh to hear.

Now he must soon be coming. Ralph Bowman-Auldjo and Peggy's unsuspected cousin. Oh, but that did not hinder, it must help to unravel the tangle. He was generous, most certainly he would refuse to rob the girl of her birthright. He was not without fair means of his own, and she, Roma, was glad of that, for so her riches need not deter him with fear of seeming a fortune-hunter. Besides, he was his younger cousin's best friend; might

argue, influence, Bruce to return. . . . Well, if not, Peggy Lee was barely out of her teens, with good looks, fortune and the long road before her.

Next day they slipped past the Fyerflaughts' boat at Bijbehara, and to please Peggy (though no reason was alleged), urged their unwilling coolies on higher. The third day they moored near Islamabad's bridge, some way below the stench and squalor but picturesqueness of the town, with its old temple and tank of sacred carp, its close-alleyed bazar teeming with tiny shops where wooden toys were chaffered over, costing at most twopence. And so taking tongas early, they drove inland between the usual tall poplar avenues, willow copses, and wet paddy-fields where the rice-plants still sprouted low.

Presently sounds of running waters heralded brawling, tumbling streamlets pouring from their hill-cradles, twisting and gleaming amongst thickets. A pine-clad hill rose cone-like in front. At its feet a hamlet under giant plane trees brooded solitary while a broad cascade of water gushed from its stone-breasted hill-heart, filling the warm air with sound.

Behind the glistening waters, old walls still enclose a wide garden where once a Moghul ruler set state aside and sported with the queen he adored so passionately, as his ancestors and kinsmen Babar, Akbar and Shah Jehan worshipped each his foremost lawful wife. And what lovers, husbands beyond compare were those men of that marvellous conquering dynasty!

There the friends spent a long summer day under the soft turquoise sky, in the shade of huge chenars, whilst David explored the crazy bridges to quaint wooden pavilions set in tanks fed from the hillside springs. Everywhere running waters, woodland, warmth, with enough remains of bygone generations to influence the mind unconsciously unto resignation, even peace. What has been will be. Here other and famed mortals have dallied

and dreamed, loved and passed away. Why mourn overmuch ?

All afternoon Peggy lay apart stretched on a carpet of white clover, with bigger purple blobs near by in patches of honeyed sweetness. As she reclined, her mind began to crystallize ever so slowly ; but purpose formed. Before the rest called her two and a half hours later she vaguely foreknew how she would plan her future.

Meantime Mrs. Drax, seated with Roma on cushions under a tree-monarch, was speaking uninterruptedly except for pauses of her own. The place and hour were suitable.

CHAPTER XXI

PANHA'LA FORT

THIS is the story told by the late childless mother who at times looked fondly over at her small son, adopted, yet her very own. Her words were sometimes halting, often suggested by look or dramatic gesture rather than spoken. Nevertheless, their purport when lacking is here reproduced ; the dialogue between herself and the dead mother as with the living child faithfully given.

Near midnight on Christmas Eve and a cool breeze from the Indian Ocean beyond the dim Ghauts mingled with the high air of the famous Mahratha eyrie whereof, says a Persian inscription on the walls : "The bastion is so lofty that the air of the mountain summit hath become a pathway for horses."

Yet Diana Drax stood alone on the battlemented roof of Shivaji's square black tower rising sheer from the precipice and dominating Panha'la fortress that itself in hill pride commands the environing plains. The soft blackness of the sky was intensified by scintillating constellations, while westward glowed dully the strange copper-coloured zodiacal light so clearly seen in this southern Indian sky.

So the Mahratha hero must often have stood on this

very spot, gazing far below on the plains simmering by day, shrouded by night, where toiled and slept his people. Again he hence looked downward frowning, when beleaguering hosts darkened the lowlands as armies of black ants. On just such a moonless night as this, later, its captive lord escaped from this very keep; an exploit still recounted with glee when Shivaji's fame is told beneath the sacred peepul tree of many a village when men rest in a listening circle.

More changes followed in the hill fortress whilst the great earth-ball whirled year after year round its sky track. Two queens ruled successively in Panha'la Fort, leaving bloodstained memories of daily human sacrifice to cruel Kali, whose shrine stood in a dark grove between two towers; tales of victims snatched from shuddering parents, of a whole country trembling for its children.

Last arrived the white conquerors with their bursting bombs, shattering the strong stone gateways adorned with poetical carvings in court Persian. The invaders rescued their English colonel, carried off prisoner here at night by treachery whilst he believed his litter-bearers were loyal soldiers hastening through morass and swollen rivers so that at daybreak he should assume command of a garrison sorely pressed by mutineers.

Such in brief is Panha'la Fort's history.

Alone and lonely. "Of all my five past miserable Christmas Eves this is the most wretched *since*——" thought Diana Drax, shrinking from recalling the time when her man, the nobler second self who came as sun-dawn into her orphaned heiress existence, had gone as sunset, leaving her desolate.

"My poor girl. . . . If Laurie had lived!" were his difficult dying words as breath failed but eyes struggled still to express their spirit-master's last behest of loving compassion.

Always she choked at that remembrance.

Yes, her man had been good to the end. Surely if little Laurie had lived he would have taken after his father, though weakly from birth, poor darling, with pathetic large eyes and drooping baby mouth.

"*Since,*" Diana had felt—almost nothing. To herself she seemed slowly petrifying, with but a faint spark of human warmth left far within; a breathing statue ever shrouded in a mist-cloud emanating from her own heart. Through its grey fog she descried hopelessly a world where happier folk worked in sunshine by day and rested near hearth-glow at night, men and wives, whilst bonny children played about their knees.

The lonely watcher threw out her arms with a despairing gesture.

Not half a mile away, beyond the grassy hill-crest broken by trees and bamboo clumps, was just such a home this Christmas Eve night. Diana Drax ached with envy. Poor Minnie Robson, whom she formerly pitied for marrying a missionary, doubtless now compassionated the childless widow—rich in all but the real treasure of life. Wan and wearied Minnie certainly looked two days ago when the new-comer called, yet welcoming her old school-friend so warmly; the thin face irradiating with gladness when telling that Doctor Robson would be home for Christmas after weeks of nursing plague-stricken villagers in the districts.

"Our seventh cold weather of plague. You lucky people living at home, and only coming out here on a pleasure-trip, do not realize that the plague is always more or less with us. Still I am not afraid; unless David should find a dying squirrel and try to comfort it. They carry the infection so, and he loves animals."

David! Ah, how Diana winced when the bright, sturdy little chap burst into the room, flinging his arms round his mother's neck.

A stab of actual bodily pain shot through the desolate

visitor's bosom. And that was why she had not gone to the mission bungalow to-day, in spite of a half-promise, nor brought some chocolates for the boy's stocking as she half intended. Coward! She now chid herself. Contemptible, self-centred wretch!

"I *was* so surprised to hear you were leaving the dear Residency people and their Christmas gaieties to come up here for this week," Minnie said. "It is all so delightful down there, and though they have made Shivaji's Tower a pleasant hot-weather retreat, I feared you might find it just a little lonely; and to confess my horrid selfishness, hoped if so to see the more of your company. What dear old times we have had together!"

She timidly laid a hand on her friend's knee, but Diana was not one of the patting kind. (Sorry now, not to have pressed it.)

The answer came dry as winter nuts. "Yes, my cousins are pretty decent and the Residency is topping. They threw fits when I cried off for this festive week, telling them I wanted to go through business papers for a few days. The colonel offered me Shivaji's Tower as a joke, and I jumped at the chance."

"You told them that?" was queried, oh, so softly.

"I did. So let us hope it was true," snapped Diana grimly. It was all she could do not to burst into tears, for she recognized that Minnie's gentle eyes had seen into her soul. Their gaze fell at once.

Mrs. Robson led off David to have tea with his ayah, hushing injured protestations against the unusual banishment. "This lady used to play with me when we were little girls, my son. You can have me every day, but she wants to talk to me now." (Words Diana was destined to remember ever after: poor little David!)

Back came Mrs. Robson, soft-footed, sighing in unconscious relief as she sat down.

"Will you forgive me if I do not return your visit

properly until Christmas is over?" she entreated, giving explanations of dusky school-children, sick pensioners, widows, harmonium duties all needing her care, hinting at more till Diana exclaimed: "Oh, Minnie! you make me feel an idle earth-cumberer. Spare my conscience."

"Ah, but you work in large ways, though perhaps you don't know it; as a landowner, a rich employer—we each have our tasks. Oh, Di dear, it does me good just to see you, looking as young and handsome as ever." Minnie had always an affectionate, clinging nature: at school her worship of the Drax girl was a joke. "But for this fancy of spending Christmas at Panha'la Fort we should never have met again."

Tears in the mild blue eyes were balanced by a loving smile.

"You would!" blurted out Mrs. Drax decidedly. "Once I heard you were alive and here, I resolved either to borrow a motor from the Maharajah, or wheedle Cousin Dick into driving me up, or at the worst starting overnight in a bullock-carriage like one of the palace ladies."

She slapped Minnie's shoulder with a hearty thump and both women laughed. Mrs. Robson's thin blade tingled pleasurably. (One pleasing recollection this midnight, Diana Drax! One—only. A kind word to a loving comrade of youth.)

Yesterday the idle visitor might have gone again to the mission bungalow, and chatted whilst her hostess darned the doctor's socks. Instead, the morbid craving to indulge in musings of self-pity unchecked lured her lone footsteps over the hill roaming. To-day—she had spent hours looking down on the bird's-eye panorama of plain, jagged with river gleams or pointed with scattered, conical, small hills.

Alone, Diana strained yearning eyes into the warm velvety blackness. Panha'la Fort, she knew, is believed by its few dwellers and the villagers below to swarm with

ghosts. Bloodcurdling shrieks in the tower were reputed to have frightened strong Englishmen. Her lip curled at the tale. "A hyena possibly, you say. Well, I'll bar him out." In her beating heart the wild thought sprang up: "If evil spirits come, why not good ones? why not my dear ones? Laurie passed near Christmas. He may remember; Lawrence will."

She stretched out her arms over the parapet with a low vibrating cry: "Come—Come!"

The *chaukidar* below, squatting in the verandah, heard and bolted into an outbuilding. A great grandson of Shivaji's *Gudkurrees*, born soldiers who kept Panha'la Fort from father to son, yet he quaked. This might either be the green-haired monster with tiger-teeth who guarded the great granary, or the spirit of the girl buried alive under the corner tower of whom record was found telling how much land was given in reward to her father-in-law, an oil-man.

Above, the watcher's ears strained. Surely, surely, some answering call, if but a whisper, must come from the other land some think so near about us. They *must* know, feel for her loneliness. She held her breath listening . . . but only muffled blood-beats drummed in her ears. Only outside the tree-cicadas chirred, then a jackal wailed.

The woman dropped on her knees, her head sunk on her arms crossed on the parapet. Not in prayer! Nay, in dumb arraigning of the Maker who formed her for motherhood, robbed her, left her a mateless, childless, useless piece of human pottery.

* * * * * *

What was that? Through the darkness came a child's voice calling: "*Diana Drax! . . . Mummy!*"

The watcher sprang up, trembling. (Her own fancy? or could it truly be——?)

Again came the child's cry, sounding from below, and this time with whimpering sound of distress at getting no answer. "Diana Drax! Di! . . . My mummy wants——"

The last words were lost in a sob.

"I'm here! I'm coming! Wait for me!" came from the battlements with motherhood's essence thrilling in the full call. Then down the steep, narrow stairs, stumbling, leaping mad-like, till the outer door was reached, flung open, and a wild-hearted woman staggered across a gravelled space, staring—*Ah! there!*

By the verandah end stood a little child in white night-shift and sandals, as the lantern showed that he had set down at his feet. A big umbrella was grasped in his chubby fist.

"David!" Quickly Diana ran to him, although a bitter gush of disappointment welled up within her. It took a second only to realize that her spirit-son Laurie would not appear with an ill-smelling lamp and a gamp.

"What is it, you poor dear?"

"Mummy! . . . Mummy sented me," piped David on a high note, then stuck; his lower lip quivered, but he knit his baby brow and straddled his legs for better support. (Why couldn't She understand?)

Down went Diana on her knees, putting her arms round him, as instinctively the child's arm stole up to her neck. She cuddled, murmured encouragement, whilst feeling—ah! with bitter sweetness—the soft warm body pressed to her bosom so close, the clinging fingers and tender infant embrace.

"Daddy's come home, he's ill, and he's sort of gone off to sleep," began David sturdily. Then as Diana kissed his cheek came a melting mood, and a whispered wail:

"Mummy cried, and she putted her head down a long

time till I pulled at her. Then she said : 'Oh, David—my poor 'ittle David ! ' an' then ' Diana Drax ' to her own self, but I fink she was wanting you."

" Yes, dear. And then ? "

" She gotted sandman in her eyes like me," explained David, " an' wouldn't wake up 'cept just for a teeny look." A sob was gulped and a treacherous tear hunted with a forefinger. " So I tooked the lamp an' daddy's numbrella an' comed for you."

" Was there no servant, dear ? ayah ? the others ? "

" All runned away 'fraid of plague," said David contemptuously.

Plague ! Diana understood in a flash and thought for a concentrated half-minute. Then she shouted to the watchman, who put his head out, recognizing that ghosts do not speak English, yet who protested shrilly. His duty was to guard the Tower, not to walk abroad.

" I'm just going to fetch brandy for your mummy. Half a second . . . here I'm back, David darling. Let me carry the lamp. Let us leave that heavy old umbrella. You don't want it."

" Do. It's to frighten off the panthers. They're cowards. If one comes I'll open it in his face an' yell Shoo ! " exemplified David.

Then anxiously, " If you're afraid of panthers, Missus Drax, I'll hold your hand."

" Do, dear. I'm not exactly afraid, you know, but it's nice to have somebody brave like you." Diana enfolded a quaking small hand in hers, felt glad of the revolver in the pocket of her ulster, which weapon was never long parted from her person when alone. Still she associated the panthers that infest the rocky sides of the fortress with tied-up goats and screened sportsmen.

They plodded on ; David unerringly telling the path.

" To the big banyan tree at the cross roads. Zen down past the M'raj's palast an' a lot of black trees wis nasty

bushes. I don't like them "—unconsciously he snuggled close to Diana, pressing against her strong body. "I say, when we comes near, you can put your arm round my neck, please, if you're feeling funny down your back."

"Like this?" Diana shielded the shrinking wee figure whose released hand clutched her garments tell-tale-wise.

A quiet cough sounded near from a hedge of cactus.

"Who is that, I wonder? Somebody taking a walk like us," hazarded Mrs. Drax, feeling a rather odd shiver along her spine.

"No. It's the panther. He's followed me all the way," explained David. "I 'spect he's the same *budmash* what eated up our fox-terrier yesterday night. Ayah thought Spot wanted a run 'cause he whined, so she opied the door into the compound a bittie an' just was putting Spotty down when Somefink tooked him right out of her arms—she just heard a squeak. I'll shoot that panther some day."

A purring cough from a tangle of lentana seemed to bear amused assent.

Mrs. Drax hurried into open ground and stood still. White walls of the Maharajah's summer villa gleamed rightwards faintly. Ahead came David's "awful dark place," as he wisely warned her.

"I've got a good plan," she announced. "Let me carry you, and you put one arm tight round my neck to take care of me. Then I'll have my pistol ready and maybe we'll shoot that nasty old panther if we can see him. Anyway, he won't dare attack two brave people like us."

"No. They're 'fraid of grown-ups," chuckled David. So if you carry me I'll be as big as you."

They started. Diana would have taken the boy pick-a-back, but felt more sure of his safety within her arm. No panther would venture a snatch there. Mother fierceness surged at the mere thought of a claw mauling the child.

Down the dark narrowing path ahead she fired a random shot to scare the prowling beast presumably alongside ; the spring of a wounded panther was too terrible a risk to run.

At last !

" Here's our gate. Twick ! " David wriggled eel-like as they entered the compound safely. Even as the child's toes strained to the verandah steps came a disappointed snarling cough from behind the pot-plants one might swear were barely high enough to hide a cat. Fearing that a chubby small boy might seem not much greater a prize to dare than a fat white terrier, Diana pushed David through the doorway that still stood open and slammed the door.

A light glimmered from the ground-floor bedroom.

On one iron bed a man's figure was stretched stiff, his head fallen backward. Mrs. Robson lay with drawn-up body on the other bed, scarce breathing. But at David's eager embrace, his shout in her ear, " Mummy, speak ! " she stirred.

As Diana administered stimulants the dim eyes unclosed ; a whisper came.

" Di . . . the boy."

" I'll take him, Minnie. I'll make him rich and, heaven helping me, good. But " (with generous impulse) " he will always be your boy, for I'll teach him to love his own mother best."

Could woman friendship offer more ?

A faint smile. " Our Father best. He is Jesus' little child. Take him as your Christ-child . . . whoso giveth . . . cup . . . cold water . . . one of these little ones in My name . . . not lose . . . reward. Dear Di—no jealousy—in heaven." That last effort exhausted the ebbing strength.

Presently came fluttering breath. Diana raised the hand-lamp to look. A glance upwards seemed rapturously

to reflect a radiance ineffable. Then the mortal eyes were extinguished.

When Christmas Day dawned a late childless woman held in her arms a little son sleeping from sheer weariness, but hale and strong.

CHAPTER XXII

THE GIANT CHENAR OF BIJBEHARA

A SPARK, like the flickering flame that leaps unexpectedly from damp slack coal seemingly cold, had flickered in Peggy's mermaid eyes at Atchibal, causing her to remark nervously :

" We are missing the last royal wedding gaieties, do you both know ? There would still be one or two left if we got back soon to Srinagar."

Her elder friends forbore to glance at each other, cheerfully agreeing as if to a reasonable suggestion.

Next evening their manjis (or hanjis, as is the more correct, less-used term) were hammering mooring-stakes into the bank at Bijbehara on the return trip, whilst the cook-boat women in fighting attitudes raised heavy pounding staves above their heads with both arms, bringing the weapons down on the unhusked rice in wooden mortars violently, in alternate thump, thump, making preparation for the evening meal. How the cook-boat infants squealed ! No children on earth are so spoilt or screech with such piercing unreasonableness as Kashmiri water-babies. Each houseboat is attended by its cook-boat, midmost of which the family sleep under the matted roof with side-mats ; parents, grandparents, children of all ages, some stray uncles and aunts, besides what hired coolies may arrange for dry accommodation on nights when the bund is rain-soaked.

To escape from the heat of the sun-blistered cabins our party sat that evening under the Giant Chenar. All river visitors know the pride of Bijbehara, with a brass plate affixed, affirming its girth as fifty-four feet ground circumference. Across the river at a little distance lay a string of gaily-painted houseboats, or unpainted brown doongas, presumably there for fishing purposes. Peggy's apprehensive glance at them induced Roma, ever alert on her favourite's behalf, to moor in solitude opposite.

Dusk fell rapidly that evening, a bank of thunder-charged clouds hiding the afterglow. In the hot, still darkness, red-shaded lamps glowed on the dinner-table, that was decked with chenar-leaves in patterns to Veraswami's fancy, as self-elected major-domo. Quietly the three friends chatted, glad of the cooler night air round their heads, in spite of giant beetles or moths fluttering under the wide branches. To and fro by lanterns white-clad serving figures carried the dishes from the river-bank.—Surely, there were many dim forms, more gleaming, low-swung lanterns than theirs, thought Roma.

A burst of laughter from the other side of the great tree suddenly revealed the fact that another party, if not two sets, were dining also al fresco on the stone-faced earthen platform built—as so often below trees in India—about the chenar's roots. Only a murmur of voices was distinguishable, yet dessert over, our trio felt their privacy invaded, or perhaps the shrill mirth-peals now and again eddying round the tree's huge bulk contrasted displeasingly with Peggy's mantle of melancholy, or Roma's heart-nestling hope.

Now the platform, being fairly high, was mounted by two flights of steps, the nearest of these being just on the rim of a patch of light thrown by the rival dinner-lamps. Approaching these, in the gloom our friends heard a familiar voice declare full-throatedly :

" I tell you the Brabbles came back to Srinagar bubbling

over about the engagement; and the charming young lovey-doves. But a man I know met Bruce Bowman just starting for the plains, and nearly got his nose bitten off for offering congratulations. The young lady is unfortunate; her birds fly away just when they seem on the point of being snared."

"Fetching little girl, all the same," boomed an elderly man's tones.

Two feminine voices, so alike they bespoke sisterhood, chimed in. "We like her ever so much. Yes, we do! Our pretty Blush-rose——"

Mrs. Drax, with a cavalier swagger, turned from the steps, marching into the lamplight. "Good evening, all you people!"

It was as if a bombshell burst among the group. Every eye strained to pierce the edge of the darkness where Roma hesitated, Peggy's form shrinking against her further side.

"Good heavens! you startled us. Why do you come creeping round like musk-rats?" exclaimed Mrs. Blackadder, vexed, but the first to recover herself.

"Won't you join us? Pray do. Is not that Mrs. Wray and—Miss Lee? I have been quite disappointed not to see more of you both," chattered Mrs. Fyerflaught, her usually listless drawl flustered. She fluttered forward, retaining Peggy's cold, unwilling hand and patting it. "Are *you* coming up to Gulmarg for golf and the gaieties presently, my dear? You really ought. The men all come up—I mean, it's the thing to do. I've only a dressing-room to spare, still, at your age a girl can afford to do without a long glass, and the general and I would be so pleased to put you up."

Before Peggy could get rid of a choke in her throat, Mrs. Hills and Mrs. Brookfield burst in with rival protestations, both sisters outvying each other in affectionate expostulations.

"No, no, she's our friend. We met first at Poona.

You'll come to me, dear; I've a hut, and we'll squeeze you in."

"Nonsense. I've got a second sitting-room that will do better. Don't listen to them, Peggy darling—come to *me*. . . . Well, then, week and week about; fair play," shrilled the other sister. Peggy found her waist encircled—her arms captured. And enheartened by Roma's vigorous backings of the proposals, she was immediately booked for at least a fortnight of daily golf and nightly dancing up at Kashmir's resort of youth or frolicsome middle-age, among the cloud-mists, when below by the river summer's heat is at full blast.

* * * * * *

"Auntie, why has that woman got her knife in me always?" burst out Peggy later.

"Because most likely she thinks she did you some hurt on shipboard," came in philosophic musing.

"*That* for a reason! Why, she ought to be sorry, and try to make up for it. Then I could forgive her."

"Of course you would. But don't you know?—

> "Forgiveness to the injured doth belong,
> But they ne'er pardon who have done the wrong."

"She began by momentary jealousy of your youth, probably a passing mood. If the whim had taken her to do you a good turn she would have felt pleased and patronizing. Now she nags on, trying to persuade herself she was in the right. It's a form of scratching a pricking conscience."

Mrs. Drax's entrance interrupted them; she held an open letter. "Here's an invitation to the State banquet, for you, Roma. I got one some time ago through my cousins at the Residency and asked for you both. But, alas! they write there is such a crowd of Europeans come

this year, they can't squeeze in another woman. Peggy dear, I am sorry."

"The one thing I was aching to see!" bemoaned Peggy, too frankly at home with her hearers to pretend indifference. Then in her old eager affectionateness: "Never mind, Aunt Di; it is just as good of you to have tried. Thank you." Lately, Mrs. Drax had half jocularly proposed to become another brevet aunt, feeling drawn by pity to the love-stricken girl. With unfeigned gladness, Peggy responded to the hint, as might a child alone in the world, clinging to all who represent in some degree the family relationships it has missed.

"It's too bad; for I don't care a button for these big functions. Only my cousins made me promise to put in an appearance and display my best war-paint. They say I would turn savage if left to my own wishes—and there is some truth in it. Oh! to be a man and wear tweed dittoes by day and the same evening suit till my valet wanted it," grumbled Diana.

"Nor do I care to go. A native royal festivity is no attraction to me," murmured Roma, rather mendaciously. She had a reason, a most secret reason, for wishing to be present. One would meet all the new arrivals in Kashmir of note, and——

Nevertheless, her eyes telegraphed a suggestion to Mrs. Drax which, later, the latter carried out, remarking only: "How you spoil her!" To which Roma replied: "You have David."

"True. But Peggy is too near your own age to be more than a young sister. Why not think some day of adopting a child as I've done. In spite of my most happy, happy marriage"—here the speaker's tones became solemn, tender—" never would I wish to risk such a chance again. Many women marry just to have children; it's the inner urging often in girls also. Peggy, for instance, might do so. She loves children, with the animal

mothering instinct that longs for its own brood to nurse, but might at worst, like a disappointed hen, accept other chicks to cuddle under her wings. You and I are past that phase—at least, I presume you are. The task we long for is training the mind as well as body of the future man—the worker and good citizen; not the mere selfish feeling that one owns a doll of one's very own flesh and blood."

To which harangue Roma bent her head, in what might have been approval, or inner humility at fearing herself lacking in the loftier self-abnegation of her companion. The action brought into close view the snow streak, already mentioned as so striking at her age, set in her glossy dark locks. Mrs. Drax was not inquisitive by nature, but they were great friends, so the question escaped: "Do tell me if your white plume is hereditary, or how you came by it. I heard two American women discussing it, and they said it was a vanity lock; and one thought of imitating it; she thought the effect so cunning."

Silently Roma parted her hair, thick massed over that spot, and disclosed a deep scar. "There! Only one other person knows of it, and that is Pollyann. Also she knows how I got it. Don't ask—you can guess. It was my white flag of surrender; after it was—hoisted—I gave up useless struggle against superior force and fate."

Diana remembered hearing how Charles Wray, a once handsome, singularly-cultured man, became violent latterly under the influence of drink, and that even he had almost killed a native servant. A gasp escaped her, and her emotion found speech.

"Thank heaven! you are free now. How a widow can ever give up her liberty passes understanding."

"It is nearly dinner-time," suggested Roma.

To return to our muttons—or rather, the lamb, Peggy. She, made aware of the post's arrival by seeing the State

banquet-card, sped to her doonga, lashed to the house-boat but so narrow of bow that an unwary step in darkness would mean a ducking. In her doll's-house saloon, six feet by four, a registered parcel lay on the one and only tiny table. The lamp-light showed the address in a writing so neat it betokened a man. The girl's breast heaved, her eyes took a hungry look, as with shaking fingers she began to open the official-looking large envelope. But even as she tore at the thick paper her heart grew chill with premonition. She knew——

Inside lay her own photograph, in the silver frame she bought so secretly from a Srinagar merchant and then gave—oh, with such shy happiness—to Bruce. Upon it lay a sheet of notepaper, with one word scrawled in seeming haste:

"Forget."

A minute or so Peggy stood as if turned to ice. This, *this* was the answer to a tear-stained, heart-wrung letter, beseeching forgiveness, imploring return, offering to give up all to which she had ever thought to have a claim.

But what lay beneath the photograph? Her letter—*unopened*.

"That settles it!" said Peggy between her teeth.

Next moment a splash sounded in the dark river, some yards away.

"What a large fish leapt," remarked Diana Drax, peering in the dusk for the gangway plank, as she came to dine in the *Pink Lotus*, the big boats' hospitalities being exchanged by turns.

The letter remained, a journeyed, tired-looking messenger, thus ignominiously sent back. It would take longer to tear into small fragments. Even then Peggy dreaded the possibility of a scrap floating miles down-stream, to be spied at daylight by curious British eyes. The lamp? No, it was dangerous to burn anything in the dry-matted, butter-muslined, water-bird nest she

owned. Hastily she locked her heart's effusion in her dressing-bag, with an undefined feeling that some day Bruce should—must read it, even if she tricked him thereinto by a feigned hand.

Pollyann appeared immediately after. "If you please, miss, dinner's ready, but I told 'Swami to keep it waiting Do you want me to do up your back?"

CHAPTER XXIII

A STATE BANQUET

A VIVIDLY coloured crowd filled the long gallery of the Srinagar palace, with its high open windows set in the colonnade overlooking the river—the strong-flowing Jhelum that is, as the Nile to Egypt, the main highway of the land. Each minute fresh groups of uniformed men, of English women in the latest evening fashions, appeared up the water-stairs from their state barges or boats. Stout men in scarlet, in blue and gold, with white turbans—most becoming headgear, that also alone possesses the varied charm of being folded and worn as the owner's individuality suggests. We can all picture the father of King Babar, who wore his " with a long end behind "—British mess-dress uniforms, Kashmiri ministers in long cloth-of-silver coats, made kaleidoscopic effect, as they crystallized into groups, greeted, dissolved, in ever-thickening numbers.

One young, girlish face, with wild-rose colouring, looked, and looked wistfully, at the unknown moving throng, as might a strayed petted spaniel, seeking some friendly face ; her eyes were filled with like liquid yearning. Ah ! on a sudden its owner perceived a spare, soldier-like figure with smooth grey head in a group of rajahs, guests at the royal wedding festivities. It must be—The shapely head turned to bow politely to an

olive-complexioned prince and showed Auldjo's clean-cut, weather-bleached features, well-proportioned, calm, purposeful.

"Why, there's Ralph Bowman—Auldjo, I should say," announced Mrs. Drax, who somewhat resembled a handsomely plumaged hawk in an aviary, in spite of her diamond necklace and hair-spray. "You've met him, haven't you, Peg? *Do* I know him, child? Why, we used to trundle our hoops together, and he's boxed my ears and, in return, got his face well scratched. He wrote to me lately, for I asked if he wasn't coming up after red bear. Here he is."

Auldjo's eye of quick survey just then lit on the raw-boned but commanding woman and the lesser nymph, who was veiled, one might say, in the most seductive Parisian dream of gauzy draperies imaginable. Straightway he excused himself to his surroundings and edged through the throng.

"Hallo, Di. Looking fit to outclimb the markor in his crags. This is a pleasure . . . *and* Miss Lee," with a handshake, that was magnetic. Women loved to feel Auldjo's clasp, that never crushed rings into delicate fingers nor implied anything but unusually real respect or friendliness in its pressure and slow withdrawal. Peggy already knew its charm, and felt as if the smile directed on her face warmed her agreeably, as would October sunshine.

"How unexpectedly delightful to find two friends of mine together, whom I thought of as in different eddies of life. So you two are acquent, as the Scots say. But where is Mrs. Wray, your aunt?"

"It's such a pity! but she did not want to come to-night; she caught a teeny chill watching polo—nothing much really. So she asked leave for me to take her place." Somehow Peggy's accents were childishly apologetic. The headache seemed unnatural, now she came to think of it.

"Ah!" If Auldjo's jaw fell, his eyebrows rose, and Peggy noticed no disappointment in his measured tones of kindly politeness. "By the list posted up there near the door, I perceive that I was to have had the pleasure of being her dinner-partner."

A khaki-uniformed aide-de-camp, looking boyish and really almost British in Peggy's inexperienced opinion, dived forward at that moment.

"Colonel, will you take in to dinner"—he consulted a paper earnestly—"Miss Lee? She takes the place of the other lady that you——"

"Quite so. With pleasure," cut in Auldjo, interrupting just in time the pregnant words intended to follow—"*you asked for.*" For Auldjo's visits to Kashmir, its capital and court, were many, and he had been at a certain office that morning where native friends pulled wires.

The crowd parted just then, leaving a lane for the Maharajah to pass up the hall, in his long black coat and enormous white turban. Behind followed the youthful bridegroom nephew, delicate featured, with singularly refined and royal air. Peggy's admiration was feminine.

"O-oh! what a lovely, lovely dress!"

For the heir wore a cloth-of-gold costume shot with rose-colour. His puggaree to match scintillated with splendid diamonds and an aigrette of like glittering dew-drops, while a glorious rivière of brilliants flanked by rows on rows of large pearls adorned his breast.

"A Prince Charming, as we English call him," agreed Auldjo, offering his arm as they fell into the rear of the Resident's party in the procession. The guests' presentation followed in a small hall so packed that Peggy found herself stumbling on a train in front and all but falling over the outstretched royal hand.

"I saw nothing of the Maharajah but his curled-up golden toes. And the prince's patent pumps alongside—

painted shoes, as Veraswami calls them," she complained, thankfully regaining the support of her companion's arm, who piloted her out of the crush to watch and criticise following couples, and then to one of the two adjacent dining-rooms.

"Look at Aunt Di," prattled the girl, excited as a child at her first big party. "She is among all the Residency party with a real Othello. See, they must be talking sport. He would turn me dumb."

"Not an easy feat either, though he is a famed Afghan warrior," smiled Auldjo indulgently. "But tell me, how comes it that both Mrs. Wray and Mrs. Drax are your aunts? They are surely not related—at least, that I ever heard of. Mrs. Drax was brought up close to our place. There was only the church between our garden and her park wall. She and I were like brother and sister all our young lives."

Peggy dimpled, a laugh gurgled. "It is brevet rank. Most people have some collecting hobby, have they not? Mine is collecting a family, as I started with next to none."

"My congratulations. You have begun well. It will be an additional honour for future specimens to be included in such good company. Are any mere men added, in a jumble bag? Of course they are not kept in a glass case like sisters and aunts?"

"On that precise question I am thinking of asking your opinion," was the demure reply, with a really shy, yet most eager look Auldjo thought roguish. He was unbending from a stiffness he was self-reproachfully aware of since finding that the niece so-called had supplanted her beautiful aunt, when soups interrupted.

"How much nicer dinners would be if nobody was troubled to eat," was Peggy's next surprising proposition.

Her companion only deigned an amused look out of

the corner of his eye, till his plate was emptied. "Excuse me, but tepid soup or tea are abomination to me, and I was not reared on dew," he apologised. "Now then. You were going to do me the honour of asking my opinion?"

Peggy's daring, that would have lately sprung to seize opportunity, once baulked, turned to shyness. Her mouth drooped at the corners, her eyes, timidly wide, sought Auldjo's glance wistfully, then fell. She murmured:

"It is something really important and quite private."

Auldjo seemed hardly to notice what she said. He turned his head ever so slightly in Peggy's direction. These words came so low, she hardly made sure she heard.

"Not now. Tell me after dinner." Then distinctly, with a cheery ring, "If you think of fishing, ask the advice of your friend Mrs. Drax. I look up to her humbly as the goddess of sport." In the same tone Auldjo went on to his neighbour on the further side. "They have seated us rather familiar-like, as the Irish say, when a dozen on a car sit half on each other's laps. Am I crowding you?"

Suddenly Peggy perceived that Mrs. Blackadder was the personage addressed; saw, moreover, that there was no undue proximity of chairs anywhere else. Aware that her rawness was being sheltered from indiscretion by a society diplomat, whom her youthful mind classed as a "stiff old dear," the damsel hung her head. Immediately afterwards her name was pronounced, and Mrs. Blackadder, with a smile artificial but illuminating as an arc lamp, was bending forward in lavish praise of "that sweet duck of a frock."

"But Miss Lee has the most delicious confectioneries, as my dhurzee once said of garments! What a fabulously expensive young—girl you are."

Had she uttered the sneering "young woman" on

her tongue-tip, Peggy must have longed to slap her. (Why is it that for elder persons to say scathingly "young lady" or "young woman" is deemed by them and their objects of enmity a virulent criticism? Of course, for a middle-aged woman to be derided as "old" has through ages been considered as fitting scorn by hoary men and youthful virgins.)

"Do let me talk a little with you," she added, turning her handsome face in entreating good-humour on both and an ample white shoulder on her rightful partner, a turbaned personage of suavely dignified air, who was being heckled on Eastern matters by an eager American retired man of business.

"Castes here, or I should say men of various callings, succeed their fathers, don't they?" the man from Chicago was declaiming across the table. "So did I, sir. My father and his brother were two noble-minded young men who built up an everlasting name in the pork-packing trade, and I succeeded them." . . .

("In the name of the prophet! He is mentioning the abomination of swine's flesh to a Mohammedan gentleman. Succour your fellow-subject in the name of our ruler of Muslims," urged Colonel Auldjo in a stage whisper.) Those around were listening with an air of pained restraint, but the nawab was equal to the occasion. "May your everlasting fame remain such as it is," came in slow response.

The simple-minded, friendly American looked quite pleased at the supposed compliment, and would have enlarged on the topic so disgusting to his interlocutor, when Colonel Auldjo, bending forward, addressed the Mohammedan in the vernacular, with courtesy. The latter, recognizing that sympathy was offered to his insulted pride, unbent with gratitude from his haughtiness, whilst Mrs. Blackadder, who knew the language from childhood at once struck in with some well-chosen words,

assuming the part to onlookers of a clever woman arbitrating between two able men in thoughtful argument. Two courses were whisked before and away from the guests with proper palace rapidity before pretty Miss Lee, sitting by reflectively, was once more attended to by her partner.

"Being sensible as you must be—no girl who is under Mrs. Wray's care could fail to acquire some of her splen—her good sense, even though one dislikes seeing too precocious wisdom—you understand why I felt forced to neglect you," said Auldjo.

There was no note of apology in his tone. He simply in matter-of-fact, guarded tones made it clear that on him, as a centurion of the Empire, devolved the duty of repairing the blunder of a well-meaning white visitor from overseas.

"Another globe-trotter," he went on, "was lent one of the rest-houses on the road in here by His Highness. They say that later, when the Maharajah stopped there, an empty tin marked ox-tongue was found in the rubbish-heap. As you are aware, this ruling family is Hindu, intensely so; and the cow and its family are sacred. That rest-house was abandoned at once. A new one has been built, I believe."

Soon afterwards there rippled a general stir. The royal host and his party, who, according to custom, had left the guests to the repast which it would have defiled themselves to witness, returned to take their reserved places. Speeches, toasts, cheers followed.

Peggy was enthusiastic. If faintly bored by the political sentences of Kashmir's ruler as to his good relations with distant magnates of his blood, she was cheered by an occasional long word which—though he shied momentarily at the obstacle—he pluckily cleared unspoken, as it were, in a flying leap. It was pure joy to her infantile mind when the leaves of the royal notes

got mixed, one dropped, and the royal spectacles followed. She applauded ecstatically the graceful thanks of the bridegroom to all the guests present who had drunk his health with three times three. Brought up by British governesses and governors, one might have thought some Varsity undergraduate from Christ Church or Trinity was speaking with modest, well-chosen brevity.

"Now—this way. Let us watch the fireworks from the last window of the hall to the left," proposed Mrs. Blackadder, as all rose to follow the procession out of the dining-room. She looked backwards with commanding good-fellowship at Auldjo, nodded at Peggy most invitingly. In the squeeze at the door, the latter felt her partner holding back till several couples pushed between them and the departing Arum Lily. With a sharp dive sideways, a quick march past covering groups, Peggy, suppressing a giggle, understood his tactics as they gained a sheltered corner with some two hundred tightly-packed sightseers between themselves and their late neighbour.

"Now," said Auldjo quietly. "Tell me."

"Oh-h!" Two small hands nervously fidgeted with a pearl string (one of Roma's gifts); yet it was so loose, why should the slender throat it encircled feel choking? A head coloured in Auldjo's mind like autumn beech-leaves in Saint Martin's sunshine bent so that the spring-like face was partly hidden.

Outside the fireworks in honour of the late royal wedding made a vividly brilliant multicoloured display. The dark river seethed, so to speak, with shikaras, crowded with eager spectators. As crews raced or stealthily attempted to jockey each other to gain a better place, the effect of the awning-covered boats was as of moving living monsters. Fire-rafts here and there lit the scene with yellow flares. Tall trees opposite,

with tops outlined dimly against the sky, gave an appearance of a mountainous background in the deceptive light, and were spangled with coloured electric lamps in seemingly carelessly disposed wreaths. Arcades of brilliance outlined the water blackness effectively; golden showers of sparks dropped in mid-air; fire balloons rose.

And Peggy found a small voice. "We were talking about my so-called aunts. The truth is, I often feel so lonely, having no near relations in the world, that I —you can't think how grateful I am when friends make-believe I belong to them. My widowed mother died when I was eleven. Her maiden name was the same as yours—Bowman."

Hi-ss-ss-ss! Bang! a rocket shot up. It spoiled the intended effect; nevertheless, Auldjo made a movement of satisfactory surprise.

"Really! But our name is not common. Do you mean that we are—we must be—cousins?"

"The old uncle who brought me up was Mr. Bowman. He lived at a place called Cowford Manor." This with a more steady upward glance.

The result was fully satisfactory. This time Auldjo really did start, drawing up his spare figure to greater uprightness than even his usual bearing.

"You don't say so! Why, he was my second cousin. I stayed there once as a boy, and my sins were preposterous in the poor old gentleman's opinion. He returned me in disgrace, as not wanted, and my dear mother was furious, for she thought me a model as schoolboys go. So we two are cousins; you and I. What an unexpected pleasure!"

His newly-found cousin, critical as youth ever is, thought the pleasure should have been expressed first and his rankling recollections in second place. Still, he did look genuinely genial. As was to be expected, questions followed.

"So he is dead. And who has got Cowford now?"

A catherine-wheel went off: two attendant rockets detracted by their sizzling from the would-be stately significance of Miss Lee's reply.

"It is *in statu quo*—just as it was. My old governess is living there as caretaker with her chickens. The will was simply a too awful muddle. That is what, later on, I should like to consult with you about, to lay the whole matter before you."

"Certainly, little cousin, if my opinion as a rude soldier can be of any help. But if the lawyers have Cowford in their grip they are not likely to let the bone go till they have gnawed the meat off it. It was a gloomy old house, if I remember rightly; silent as a week-day church; trees smothering the windows. But lots of birds'-nests."

"Oh, but I—I—it has been greatly improved. You will be sure to say so, and——"

Mrs. Drax at that moment discovered the pair. Her nawab palled as a conversationalist, and she had been seeking her charge vainly in the throng.

"Here you are. Don't let us separate, for it may take ages to find each other again. As to our boat, goodness knows where it may be." Then, with good-humoured comradeship, looking upon Auldjo as an old friend of her own age, who by the mere accident of Roma's absence found himself unsuitably paired with a girl young enough to be his daughter, she began to talk of sport.

"Are you going to do any fishing? You've got your doonga, the *Sharp Ship*." (A listener felt a twinge at the too-familiar name.) "I have been half thinking about a week on the Wular Lake before the real heat comes on, and that we shall take to the mountains. Only I'm chumming more or less with Mrs. Wray and this bit of a chit"—indicating Peggy with affectionate raillery—"and they may prefer to stick on here and waste their money and energy on buying embroidered teacloths and

mooning at the Club. Would you care to join me for a few days ; and I might go ? "

Auldjo perceptibly hesitated. Peggy burst in :

" Oh, but we'd love to go. At least, I would. And Aunt Roma will too, I am sure, if I coax her."

" I shall be very glad indeed," decided Ralph Bowman-Auldjo.

CHAPTER XXIV

SPIRITS OF THE NIGHT

A PITCH dark night and evil spirits abroad.

Of all lakes in Kashmir, indeed in all India, the Wular is largest, less beautiful than most, and haunted to a fearsome degree, as all Kashmiri boatmen know, by the worst of the many water-demons which ride in storms and make all lakes more or less dangerous after sundown. Towards evening the *Pink Lotus* and *Whale*, preceded by the lighter doongas, Auldjo's *Sharp Ship* and Peggy's *Flyin' Fish*, found themselves moored more or less ill in their anxious skippers' opinion. Their course had been laid for a favourite creek or nullah, just capable of holding a big houseboat and one smaller craft. It was sheltered by a grove not too near, also was luckily too narrow for a capsize, seeing both banks all but grazed the vessels' sides. To the disappointment of the manjis, but the pleasurable feelings of their employers, therein loomed already a large ark, the *Cormorant*, on the roof deck of which two portly figures reclining under an awning, struggled up, welcoming the new-comers with vigorous signals.

They were the Brabble pair, who lost no time in carefully descending their ladder and hurrying to the lake-edge some yards distant.

"We've been fishing here four days; rather poor sport. You'll all come to dinner, what, eh?" halloed the little

doctor hospitably, eyeing Colonel Auldjo with genial curiosity worthy of Pepys. "What d'ye think my wife woke me up to tell me last night? (Wasn't asleep, my dear? Now, how do you know?) There was a bit of a breeze, and 'Edgar,' said she, 'there must be some monster fishes at the side of the boat. Don't you hear them lap-lapping. They will have come up for a drink.' Ho, ho! Now where are you all going to tie up?"

Unquestionably the two large houseboats must remain by the open lake-side with one doonga. This latter Auldjo proposed should be his, ceding the cosier nullah to Peggy's *Flyin' Fish*. The arrangement would necessitate, however, parting from the *Pink Lotus*, the square platformed end of which the narrow-nosed *Flyin' Fish* was tied to, close enough to step across. Therefore the *Sharp Ship's* owner showed his white teeth in satisfaction, promptly inserting the toy craft that, with the family cook-boat, represented his sole fortune, into the coveted creek. Kareema was a treasure, known as Sponge-bags, since Hopkins discovered that his rather loose nether garments were of just the useful check familiarly associated with that article.

"Driving *pigs* in," remarked Veraswami, alluding to the mooring stakes. There was only one tree near to which a chain could be attached, and that was an old chenar, its massive trunk so hollowed that a fire was invariably lit in it by successive boat-cooks and there was room and to spare for not pots only, but also two or three smokers of the inevitable hookah, which is shared in turn. A huge branch projected over the water, at which Kareema shook his head in discretion. But he was young, so pretended wisdom beyond his elders. Ahamdoo of the *Flyin' Fish* might not have chosen that spot but for his junior's unasked advice to shun it. A boy of thirty! Setting up his counsel, forsooth!

The sun set behind wild, upheaped clouds; like all cloud-masses in Kashmir, these resembled blocks of sharply

broken alabaster, rather than the softly rounded fleeces of an English sky.

It was the evening but one after the State banquet, and Roma had allowed herself to be hustled hither by Peggy, her spoilt child, willingly, nay, gladly—though with secret nervous tremors. The intervening twenty-four hours were spent by Auldjo in getting fishing licenses, with shooting leases to follow from various Government officers, besides seeing to rods and anglers' requisites. Meantime the married ladies rowed round the Chenar Bagh and the Jhelum mooring-places, dispersing P.P.C. "tikkuts." Peggy was busiest of all in her doll's ship, now a floating bower of roses and carrying a cargo of cherries, her deck and saloon piled with bales of embroideries, crowded with squatting, rank-smelling merchants in more or less cleanly white garments. Other water-leeches clung to the boat-windows on either side, waiting their turn. In exasperation at length with their Oriental persistence in slowly unrolling bundle upon bundle, containing table-cloths if she demanded cushion-covers, or bed*a*spreads instead of embroideries, miss-sahib sprang up, singled out a youth with lustrous dark eyes and some seeming intelligence, and dumped upon his stunned brain her entire custom. Habib raised both hands in the salaam of double gratitude. "If not knowing how do all best, my father at home I ask what he say. He great commander in work."

Now the *Flyin' Fish* mistress felt unwell, with slight hoarseness. Little wonder! having sat in a draught at the banquet, stood later by open windows in thinnest evening-dress, and left in a shikara under a chill drizzle.

"Do come and sleep on the *Pink Lotus* to-night," urged Roma, after a general dinner on the *Cormorant*, when Doctor Brabble warned their Blush-rose she would soon be only fit for pot-pourri at this rate. "You look like a dissolving view."

"But how can dad be when my brain feels so extra dense it must be solidified," snuffled Peggy, now so much at ease with the others she treated them also to the petted child fooleries that she indulged in with Roma. "Id is good to hab a solid head."

"Don't encourage her in being stubborn," pleaded Roma to the rest, who laughed. "Now do come, Pegtop. We can easily put your bed up in my room, not to disturb Pollyann."

For that faithful henchwoman, who usually slept for propriety's sake on Peggy's doonga, was suffering from a touch of fever, therefore installed in the *Lotus'* spare cabin, generally used by Peggy as a dressing-room on high occasions. For with the doonga side-mats lowered for decency in dressing, one came out of the *Flyin' Fish*, as she truthfully declared, "looking a sight."

Doctor Brabble, hearing of Pollyann's indisposition, trotted off before dinner to prescribe; and over coffee and cigarettes Roma related the patient's description of this interview.

"'He was very feeling, ma'am. He said to me, "You're suffering, Mrs. Pollyann, I see you're suffering." And I said to him, "I am, sir. It's a weakness," I said, "that's come to me since we entered Kashmir, but what is only to be expected, considering that at home I eat good beef every day of my life, but here never is it allowed by these heathen Hindus so much as to cross the fronteer, let alone one's lips. And what nourishment, I ask you, sir, is there in these brown sheep and skinny chickens at fippence apiece?"'"

"She did; she did!" chimed in Brabble delightedly. "But she found me sympathetic?"

"She greatly approves of your diagnosis," continued Roma gravely. "She repeated it in an awed voice. 'The doctor said, ma'am, he quite agreed; and that I was very likely suffering from Armenia, produced by a want of red corkscrews in the blood.'"

The famous physician rubbed his hands in glee. He asked Mrs. Brabble if Pollyann did not surpass his mother's old maid, known for quaint sayings. Once, on being sent to inquire into the cause of a fire in a restaurant only a few houses distant from her mistress's flat, she returned gloomily reporting, "They say as how it was a case of over-*'eatin' !*"

A roll of distant thunder sounded as he ended. This was strange, as Auldjo remarked, for the moon shone radiant. But the party broke up soon after, not to risk a shower in regaining their boats. The two men together strolled on the bank, enjoying a last smoke and a fresh breeze that had sprung up. As they passed by the *Pink Lotus* both descried a woman's form muffled in a long red garment with a hood drawn over her head, putting out a tentative toe in the darkness as if feeling for the pointed head of the *Flyin' Fish.*

Auldjo called out warningly: "Mrs. Wray! Wait—let me help you."

Leaping on the platform beside her, the gangway plank being removed at night, he struck a match and, leading the way, held out his hand in guidance.

"How good of you," thanked Roma, in an unusually softened tone. "I am going to make Peggy change places with me for to-night. The open sides of the doonga let in too much damp air if it rains to be good for her cold."

"But why not have called Veraswami to bring a lantern? Where is he? *Qui hai !*"

"I here, sir," answered a ready voice and a light shone. "I done gone find a lamp. Missus not waiting."

Leaving her reproachful helpers, Roma passed inside the tiny boat, smiling under her large hood. Beyond the diminutive saloon over-crowded with a pair of cane easy chairs and one small-sized table heaped with books, photographs and work-bags, the walls gaily draped with curtains

embroidered in vivid violet iris, a favourite Kashmiri design, came a yet more diminutive bedroom. Its owner was already tucked in her narrow cot or charpoy, beside which fluttered frilled muslin curtains in the night breeze, now increasing. Roma remonstrated. "Why not have some of the window-mats pulled down! I will—for I've come to hunt you into hospital. Now be a sensible girl—not an obstinate minx who will need to be nursed for a week."

But Peggy was obdurate, arguing that she invariably slept in a thorough draught; it suited her; whereas Roma, with her neuritis, needed far more to take precautions. Lastly she was too sleepy to stir. That woolly jacket hanging on a hook was all she needed to be a little warmer.

"Put on this. It's pure Pyrenean wool, as warm as a toast. I brought it to sleep in here myself, in case you would be nice."

Roma stripped off her crimson wrapper, which Peggy accepted just to be obliging, offering her cotton dressing-gown in exchange. Returning, Mrs. Wray was lighted across by her waiting bearer. Neither saw a man watching behind the big chenar tree overshadowing the *Flyin' Fish*. Once the slight figure in pale draping disappeared within the big houseboat's outer saloon, Auldjo moved towards his own boat, supposing that the desired exchange of occupants had been effected.

"Doesn't look like rain after all," he thought, for a splendid moon shone as a silver disc in the calm water of the sheltered creek. The tree reflections therein showed almost as distinct as the tall poplars around.

"Miserable tubs these for a woman," he muttered, discontented at thoughts of the *Flyin' Fish*. "If a storm comes on any time these roofs," giving an upward glance at the *Sharp Ship's* ceiling, "are only of reed-thatch and must have shrunk with the heat lately." An old campaigner, Auldjo covered his clothes with a waterproof

and threw another on his bed, remembering the recent thunder in the distance.

"One never knows. A storm will swoop down on this lake in next to no time."

Slowly he turned in, his last glance through the opening or window next his charpoy, where a side-mat was tied up, being towards the black shadow of the big tree some twenty yards distant, beneath which floated the other doonga. The red-clad figure of the beautiful and gracious woman he believed now sleeping there floated before his mental vision. How unselfish to be there at all! She who looked born to be swathed in softnesses, protected from every least chill breeze; who had never approved of a doonga from the first, and only gave in about this one to please another. To please others. That was his dear lady's gift; that her aim always—putting self aside in the joyous, impulsive manner that deceived some people; not him.

Ah! she pleased; pleased fatally. From the first Auldjo felt her charm, had daily on board ship been affected by it as never before in life, for the spell was that of a pure-souled woman, exalted in ideals, yet not "too good for human nature's daily food."

The hardened soldier felt a mental nausea recalling in contrast that other to whom some years of his first youth had been devoted, whose honour to himself, "rooted in dishonour stood." She deceived, threw him over for a richer rival, whilst still clinging fast to her husband, so safeguarding her reputation according to society's farcical byelaws. Bah! Such women use their married mate as children hold up a shielding pinafore crying, "You can't see me now." His eyes twinkled, his nostrils twitched amusedly at the flattering thought that even Lily Blackadder could detect no least trace in his manner, when lately they met, of any feeling beyond civil indifference. Heavens! she would triumph too much in knowing what

years of bitterness against women poisoned his mind after that lesson she taught him in feminine treachery.

Let her be.

Roma! Roma! His lips forming the name curved into a wistful smile. Young, lovely, but a martyr in her married life (for so Diana Drax confided to Ralph lately, his blood boiling at even a bowdlerised recital), would the escaped victim dare trust another man to console her for those cruel wrongs? If so, none could be worthy. One might only—would, heaven knew how joyfully!—strive his best and be humbly grateful for so glorious a privilege.

About three o'clock Roma awoke, suddenly springing to a sitting posture on her bed. Hail clattered with the noise as of innumerable bullets upon the shingle boat-roof. Lightning lit the cabin with a crimson glare, dying out into pitch darkness. A roar of thunder close overhead crashed so deafeningly in her ears that involuntarily she put up her hands.

Next moment, wakening fully, she exclaimed to herself, "Oh—Peggy!" In terror lest the frail doonga might be stripped of its roof by the wind, as happens not infrequently, and thinking in self-blame, "Oh, why did I not persuade her at least to tie down the side matting?" Roma found herself huddling on whatever clothes, shoes, the quick-recurring lightning-flashes revealed. Her maid was in the next cabin, the door between being ajar, and here Pollyann was emitting prayer-moans between buryings of her head under the blankets and poppings out to watch her mistress with the scared helplessness in a storm of some otherwise brave persons.

"You lie still—you're not well," exhorted Roma, realizing her maid's terror. It took an effort not to add, "You're useless."

Veraswami's cupboard room lay beyond, and at this door his mistress hammered with all her might. But

soft hands are of little use in such a din of the elements. Piercing calls were of more avail, and were answered by the ever ready, " Yes—mum," as the Hindu struggled to his senses.

" Bring your lantern, call the manji. Miss Lee's doonga may turn over. We must help."

The two men appeared in a few brief minutes, though seeming over-long as Roma impatiently groped her way by aid of lightning-flashes to the end of the saloon. Peering out, thank heavens! the *Flyin' Fish* loomed close ahead. And there on the bund crouched its manji, Ahamdoo, with his brother from the cook-boat, both men holding fast to the boat-ropes. A lamentable call of " Fatima! " was upraised to the Mohammedan saint between two thunder-rolls; then " Allah! "

All the servants and cook-boat women, even to the aged grandmother, were huddled also under the lee of the boats, raising cries to their local gods whilst holding on to the various craft by chain, rope, side. Veraswami had dragged in the dripping manji at the rear to get orders. Neither man dared face the storm as it drove on the front. The hailstones were the size of walnuts, some even of pigeons' eggs. When ordered by Roma to open the glass door and try to get across to the *Flyin' Fish* it took all the united strength of boatman and bearer, one being old, the other puny, to force the door half wide. Then both tottered back, forced inwards as it crashed to, while a volley of hail rattled that killed every crow and even kite roosting in the grove.

" This will pass in a few minutes," breathed Roma, conscious that they or she must be blown into the water if they ventured to cross to the doonga. " Then I'll go myself——"

There came a mighty crash.

* * * * *

Auldjo heard the rending, smashing sound, followed by a chorus of shrieks from the Kashmiris on the bund.

Already dressed, he had nevertheless wakened later than others, because a heavy sleeper and that his boat lay sheltered. Now he had only delayed to get a storm-lantern and order Kareema to come also; but prior to obeying, the man, as owner, naturally urged that their own mooring-ropes must be tested, and his wife and the sweeper left to hold them. Before the crash both master and man had, however, started to the ladies' boats. Hearing it, they ran.

"The chenar. Big branch——" panted Kareema, guessing the truth before a red lightning-flare lit up the scene.

The *Flyin' Fish* lay a wreck. That overhanging huge limb fell with the last dying convulsion of the storm, cutting the boat right in two. Both ends, half-filled with water, were heeled over, one floating unmoored.

Auldjo bounded at the sight, as never he had spurted since a lad in his first hill-brush against Pathans, when he was first in at the taking of a fort. His voice rang with a sound his own soldiers knew, and they only in action.

"'Swami! Who's in the water?"

"Missus is! The missuses!" screamed the Hindu, who, carrying faithfully out directions, stood holding a lantern, and a rope to the other end of which something or someone invisible within the wreck was attached.

"Your missus—and you stand there!"

It was a cruelly unmerited taunt, as the British officer snatched the lantern to hurry forward, throwing its beams on the dark water. The storm had ceased suddenly as it had begun, the hail no longer obscuring all view.

There! A reddish patch showed partly submerged in the wreckage—floated out. Down went the lantern.

In sprang the rescuer. A few strong strokes, and Ralph grasped the drowning form, that mercifully did not struggle or cling. Swimming with the current, he gained the shore some yards distant from the wreck, there lifting the dear burden in his arms. Gently he laid it on the grass, resting the head that was still hooded on his arm.

His free hand felt, found her heart with awful fear. It beat. Thank heaven! "Dearest. My own, own love! Speak!"

And Peggy stirred, only half-fainting, to hear these words in her ears.

"Give her to me," cried Mrs. Drax arriving, and thrusting him unceremoniously aside.

"Let's see! let us see. Stop a moment—why this is capital—capital," followed from Brabble, seizing command of the situation. Auldjo stumbled aside, feeling ready to drop on his knees and utter thanksgiving with the old "prayable" manji, who was now making obeisances on the rain-sopped bank with upraised hands. He moved away at once not to spy upon doctor and woman friend in their ministrations.

For a short space Ralph stood strangely weakened; unable to think, soul-thrilled. A faint beat again pulsed under his touch; a head lay once more within the hollow of his happy arm. . . .

"All right, *huzoor*. Two memsahibs done got out—No fear—" cheerfully announced Kareema, joining him. Then in more fluent native speech followed urgings on the sahib as to the need of also getting dried. Meanwhile the other Kashmiris were busy with salvage.

Not until some hours later did Auldjo discover, and at a fitting opportunity after two or more days repair, his slur on the Indispensable's courage. The Hindu truly was not alone about to wade in to Missie Lee's rescue, but hopped like a hen on a hot griddle on being impetu-

ously ordered to hold the rope that his missus (Roma) was making rapidly fast to her own waist. "You can't swim. I can—this lake is deep—in parts," she flung at him, so to speak, breathlessly as she plunged into the water that rose above her knees. Distracted by the horrible fear that a slender, girlish body might be lying crushed shapeless within the wreck, Roma still retained her presence of mind, enjoining on Veraswami to keep the lantern's rays upon her as she partly disappeared among the confused mass of leafage where the branch, itself as big as many a full-grown tree, had struck the doonga fairly amidships. Groping, she sought to find Peggy's cabin door.

At that minute Auldjo's stronger arm wrenched the lantern from the Hindu, leaving Roma in darkness until it was recovered where the sahib later flung it on the bank by a small cook-boat boy, who, devoted to that great personage, the Butler, rushed to obey Veraswami's piercing yells for light ! light !

Mrs. Drax, whose *Whale* lay nearest the nullah, came last to the rescue, yet not late. But the two who afterwards secretly patted themselves on the back as having kept their heads throughout the crisis were—can it be believed ?—Mrs. Brabble and Pollyann.

Snug in their respective vessels, both heroically left their warm beds, nevertheless, the very minute they felt persuaded the thunder had really ceased. Both, inspired by the like thought-wave, wrapped themselves wisely, then with careful energy set about boiling hot water by help of their spirit-lamps and little kettles. The one prepared to brew tea. The other reflected that a nice hot jorum of whisky-and-water would be sure to please her lord and master, besides doing half-drowned other sufferers no end of good.

Next morning, when secretly abashed to shame by learning the identity of his prize rescued from the Wular evil genii, Auldjo sought Doctor Brabble.

"Tell me, was Miss Lee conscious, in your opinion, when I got her out. Because I—I—fear I gave vent to some words that were—hum——"

"Not ladylike, ho, ho! Put your mind at rest, my dear fellow. She knew no more than a new-born baby."

CHAPTER XXV

THE MARRIAGE OF THE WATERS

SHADIPORE, which means " Marriage of the Waters," is a village placed where the snow-swelled Sind stream, rushing down from its sacred mountain spring by glen and pleasant valley, joins the broad and here stately Jhelum river.

All visitors know its wide nullah, where boats mostly linger some hours, if not days, by the grassy grove of lightly-foliaged young chenars.

To this safe haven, the day after their accident, Brabble, in his capacity of doctor, hurried his patients, all the flotilla keeping company. There they were met by a nurse, for whom he had telegraphed to the Visitors' Hospital at Srinagar.

Nurse Lyttle was a smiling small person, with deep blue eyes fringed by absurdly long black lashes, eyebrows, to believe her own description, laid on thick and mercifully just escaping being fur patches; in reality their arch was defined in sprightly curves. Wavy hair to match was almost hidden under a jauntily white-winged cap.

In five minutes both patients took a liking to that merry face and ready wit. On Peggy's part this soon grew to positive adoration.

" Irish? Of course I am, but how did you guess? "

she cried naïvely. "Ah, now, Mrs. Wray, do tell me?"

"It was an, 'Ah, do!' that was so coaxing it betrayed you," croaked Roma hoarsely from her pillow. "But why have you no brogue? A suspicion of it gives such a racy flavour to our sober English."

"Like a rub of garlic on the side of the pot—No, I did not say outside. Why I've none is, I suppose, that the Irish language only just came into fashion when I was at school. 'Learn it by all means, only no mixtures, mind,' my father said. 'Real Erse, or pure Saxon, but not shandygaff.'"

Roma proved the worse of the two patients, from a return of neuritis that, as Sister Lyttle pityingly explained to inquirers, was just like a bad tooth in the arm. "I had one lately, so I can feel for you, Mrs. Wray; it had a big hole in it till I got it out, and I called it my aching void."

In two days, however, thanks to youthfulness and recuperative powers, Sister Lyttle triumphantly helped Peggy out in the morning sunshine, the Indispensable insisting on carefully holding her arm along the landing plank. His eyes shone like rushlights at seeing one of his missuses about; they would blaze when Roma appeared.

"I done put out rattle chair, mum," he informed the nurse with the tone of a colleague, "plenty cusshens; quite allright."

So into the cane rocking-chair Peggy was lowered by her supporters with precautions as if she were a torn sawdust doll, so she remonstrated. And Auldjo, reading the *Civil and Military Gazette* sitting in front of his own vessel, as is bund etiquette, rose and lounged over to greet her and congratulate Sister Lyttle on her skill.

"Thank you," she bridled, "but we nurses always

give praise to the doctor. Though, indeed, most doctors say the recovery is due to the nurse."

"What part of Ireland do you come from?" asked Auldjo, in the cautiously measured tones he used towards women; to men they were like the rest of his outer appearance—soldierlike, smart, sometimes brief to brusqueness. So simple a question! No doubt it was her nationality that obliged the little nurse, whose eyes gave a blue blink as if startled, to answer with another question:

"Oh, do you know Ireland? Do tell me."

"No, but I have friends in the South." Auldjo noticed her evasion and forbore to repeat his question.

"In the South. A little while ago we had such a nice girl at the hospital with enteric—do you know her? a Miss Brian. And she told me she was Irish, at least her people were. 'Let me think, sister, and I'll tell you the place they lived in,' she said, and thought away hard. 'Ah! I have it! It's County Cavan*agh*.' How I laughed! There now, Miss Lee"—pointing a finger of detecting glee—"I don't believe you know any better than she did. But I must fly. My other patient's peptonised milk needs to be prepared. I'll send your milk food by Faithful presently. Come along, Veraswami, and help."

She tripped away, willingly followed by Faithful, as she called the Hindu, whose present ambition was to pick up all the mysteries of sick-nursing this skilled young personage might chance to reveal in his ever-watchful presence.

"She never told where she comes from," commented the colonel musingly, looking after her. Then, as Peggy burst out in praise: "Yes, she seems all you say. It would be almost worth being ill to be nursed by her."

Afterwards those words came back to both of them. How little one foresees knowingly; yet sometimes words

escape us that later seem a premonition. Does not subconsciousness cry out unheeded? Or may some listening power compel us to work out our heedless sayings?

"*Cousin Ralph!*" came a small voice.

Auldjo looked around and down quickly. Peggy was gripping the arms of the "rattle" chair with the nervousness of shy youth at her own daring. Her wild-rose colouring was whiter, more exquisitely pink than even before illness. An engaging tiny smile curved her lips, a smile translated as appeal by the humility in her changeable eyes, sea-blue or sea-green according to their reflections. Eyes, lips, voice allied in fresh youth. Their union brought an indulgent softness to the soldier's time-hardened features, his brain turned slightly dizzied by this vision of Spring; so near; so pretty. He had held her lately to him close, felt her heart's beat—his own kith and kin.

"You don't *mind* my calling you that. You see, I can't help being a relation," tinkled a voice like a musical rill trickling among daisies.

"Mind?" ejaculated the man, amazed. "Why, it is a tremendous privilege. My dear child—forgive me! I should say, little Cousin Peggy—you can't think how pleased I am to own a girl cousin at last."

"Only she might be—so much nicer. Somebody clever or accomplished, instead of just a foxy-haired country goose, who has only been brought up at Cowford, and hasn't much to talk about."

Cunning little puss, lowering her lashes discreetly. No doubt the stern soldier supposed those love-words unheard wrung from his heart on saving her life the other night. Dear old Cousin Ralph! Standing there with his stiff back to the sunlight, his crow's-feet softened, he looked only a little over thirty; a keen, commanding leader of men. Yes; his girl cousin felt she could be proud of him. But her thought passed in a second.

Even as Auldjo hesitated, perplexed as to whether his youthful relation was fishing for compliments or really modest, she changed her note.

"Well—no matter about that. Let us talk business. As head of the family you ought to know our—your—all about Cowford. Aunt Roma and I have come out to India just to find you and tell you. Really it's terribly serious."

For Colonel Auldjo made a movement of surprise.

"It's easier to explain because you remember how odd my uncle could be. See, here is a copy of his will."

Peggy fished in the depths of a so-called work-bag, bringing up a chocolate-box, novel, tin of butterscotch, and half a hundred picture postcards. Sorting out two envelopes, but retaining one, impressively she added with a scarlet geranium blush: "Here is his will, and—this letter! Please read both, not now, but when you are by yourself. And remember . . . that if you feel able to—to fulfil what our deceased relation says as to his wishes I am prepared to accept them."

Down dropped Peggy's eyelids. She lay back in her chair, adding somewhat faintly: "Think it over well. Consult Aunt Roma if you like. Now—I must rest and would rather be all alone, please."

Wondering greatly, Auldjo lifted the envelope that lay upon the rug spread over the convalescent's knees and withdrew. She opened her eyes slowly and looked after him, wondering too.

Left alone, Peggy's first impression was that she felt remarkably well. Come!—had she been a hypocrite, pretending she was faint just now? Loftily resolved to chide herself if so, she proceeded to consider, but soon found exculpation. "It was, maybe, *the* most important moment of my life," she mentally decided. "So no wonder if I did feel upset; in fact, one ought to—therefore that was why I did, or at any rate thought I did."

Gravely satisfied at the propriety of her feelings, she glanced at the chocolate-box, but forbore the treat, closing her eyes with a sense of heroism. That action made her more alive to the sounds of nature around. From a distant, solitary chenar, rooted in a patch of milk-white iris droned a ceaseless " Coo-coo-ooi-*cwi !* "

The listener's head rolled on her cushion as if tortured by the sound. On and on . . . would it never end ?

At last came a cheerful voice, " Here is your chicken-broth. Been having a doze ? Don't those ring-doves make a cosy love-me-ducky burbling ? "

Peggy groaned : " Give me a bullock-cart with no grease on the wheels. Drive a screw into my brain. Set all the babies of all the cook-boats squealing together for an hour —I'd prefer any of them, or all at the same time."

" Come to your cabin and I'll shut the windows. You are tired," ordered Sister Lyttle soothingly, and led her patient to the spare room in the *Whale.*

Meanwhile Diana was paying the other invalid a visit, and, looking out of the window, cheered her with remarks on Peggy's progress to recovery.

" She looks positively better for her ducking ; like a bunch of violets after being soused in water. Ralph Auldjo is having quite a long chat with his new cousin. Dear me ! how queer it is to realise how years have rushed by while we feel hardly any older. It seems only yesterday that Ralph and I were called " the little lovers " by our respective families, who used to nod and whisper together ; I believe, arranging even our marriage settlements to their own satisfaction."

" Why did you not tell me ? I had no least idea you and he had ever been—attached." Roma's head was half-raised, her eyes shone with feverish light, two red spots showed on her cheeks. She spoke with almost a reverential diffidence.

Mrs. Drax, who was slow of perception, therefore a poor

nurse in illness, as she herself candidly admitted, saw no danger signals, because still placidly gazing at the chenar grove and its central figures.

"Attached? We were at first like brother and sister to each other, being two lonely neighbouring children. School-partings made some difference, but we remained devoted friends. When Ralph joined the army, and I appeared as grown-up, he may have felt more tender. I am not sure. At any rate, my friendliness nipped any sentimentality. At my third or fourth ball my confidences were poured into his kind ears as to the number of proposals from flagrant fortune-hunters that already had shocked me. Not being ever really good-looking, I was free from vanity, thank goodness. Old clergymen (two of them), my family lawyer, a singing-master; every unmarried or widowed male being of my acquaintance almost. It was revolting. 'Ralph,' I remember saying, 'never shall I marry at all, but enjoy my utter liberty, unless I meet some man whom I can worship with heart and soul! And so far none has crossed my sight, and none ever may.' Then Ralph went to India, and afterwards I met Lawrence!"

"But *now*," ventured Roma, who seemed husky.

"Hush!" ejaculated her friend sharply. "It would be desecration."

There followed a long pause, after which, wishing to make amends for showing anger towards an invalid, Diana added with brusque playfulness:

"All the same, Aunt Mary will have it that Ralph has never married on my account. Absolute rubbish! I wish to goodness he would take a fancy to Peggy or some nice girl, but his one love is his profession. As to me, David is quite enough for me; indeed, too much at times."

Sister Lyttle coming in with some chicken-broth, noticed Roma's heightened colour, and promptly chid the visitor.

"Tut, tut! What have you both been talking about that my patient looks excited?"

"Not a subject that middle-aged matrons like us care enough about to really fuss over," deprecated Diana. "Only about men. They interest girls like Miss Lee and you. Though, as a nurse, you ought to be disillusioned, as hospital will have taught you their tricks and their manners, as the doll's dressmaker said."

"Before ever I took to being a hospital nurse an old Irishwoman taught me that much by object-lesson," said Sister Lyttle dryly. "Her husband had practically deserted her, though the poor body would only give in that it was 'by the way of his going to America to earn his livin'.' She used to write to him every quarter for money, and sometimes got a driblet. Otherwise she was growing old and of little use for work, so we sisters begged my father that she might stay on in her cabin, and we brought her pickings from our schoolroom teas, and pennies, and used to write her letters asking assistance. One day we went to see Biddy, and found her sitting resigned with folded hands.

"'I've heard, ladies dear,' she said impressively, 'I've had a letter from himself. It come yesterday.' 'And what does he say?' we asked. 'Ah! see now, it's short if not swate. "My dear wife," says he. "Don't you be writing me anny more letters for money," says he. "For I've married another gyurl," says he. "And I remain your loving husband," says he.'"

Removing the chicken-broth cup with a sly side-look at Diana, who was laughing in deep-noted relish, the nurse added, by way of postscript, "I won't be sure, but I'm under the impression that your David was calling for you just now."

"Considering that the mannikin is gone with his bearer in the cook-boat shikara to see the men fill the water-jars from the one and only spring, a mile off, I doubt it," reflected

Mrs. Drax aloud. Suddenly enlightened—" But you want to get rid of me."

" We-ll. One can do more by using oil than vinegar, I always think," suavely returned Sister Lyttle. " Hark ! Here is Doctor Brabble coming to see my patient. I would know his laugh if it was boiled."

CHAPTER XXVI

TANGLED AND TORN

"ONLY one point above normal." Sister Lyttle was examining her inseparable ally, the tiny tube which bespoke Roma's temperature. "Come, you are a credit to me. Now as a great treat you may receive a visitor for just a little while. Somebody who has been asking for you constantly wants to know if you are well enough to see him. Colonel Auldjo!" The little nurse gave her starched-winged cap quite a jaunty toss, her blue eyes looked expectant as if just "at" the most rose-red page in a love-story.

Roma paled. Her vision seemed looking inwards, alarmed, yet—a little—how little hopeful. She said low: "Very well. Will my black tea-gown do, do you think, with one of those French boudoir caps?"

"Black? Heaven forbid! Wear that sunset summer-cloud from Doucet's that just ravished me by the sight of the end of its tail. Pollyann grudged me even that teeny peep," exhorted Nurse Lyttle, breathing fast in easily-roused excitement. "A cap of course. Yours are fetching enough to insure a proposal any time any man sees you in that Mechlin one with the bobbles. Cost a trifle, no doubt, about ten guineas"—heaving a small, irrepressible sigh.

Roma's face brightened ever so faintly as she gave a reserved consent.

Just then Peggy popped a morning-daisy visage past the door curtain, her fuller entrance prefaced by the unnecessary assurance that, " It's only *me*." Which was followed by the plausible but untruthful declaration, " Nurse Lyttle knows I'm quite a good nurse by now, from watching her tricks. So may I stay a few minutes ? "

Somewhat reluctantly Sister Lyttle consented, just whilst she saw to scalding some milk. Her professional caution was jealous lest the bloom of her patient's appearance should be dimmed for that interview later with the colonel. Also Roma herself felt somehow apprehensive and ill at ease.

" Auntie," began Peggy, plumping down once they were alone, her chin on her hands and a dilly-dilly, coaxing look on her face, as when in the old rhyme Mrs. Bond invited to come and be killed the ducks that swam in the pond. " Have I ever asked you a big—a huge favour in my life ? "

" What a bombshell ! No-o, nothing that one could call a great favour certainly."

Roma forced an uneasy smile ; suppressed firmly the rapid reflection that it was almost impossible for her favourite to have asked anything of consequence that had not been forestalled by her own, Roma's, affection.

" Then I am going to do so now. It's tremendously serious ; it involves my future life happiness." Peggy's tone grew tragical. " If Colonel Auldjo consults you as I've asked, or advised, him to do as to carrying out Uncle Peregrine's letter by marrying me *don't* say anything against it. Will you ? "

" I ?—Peggy—I ? "

The suddenly attacked woman turned marble white ; her breath failed. But the cabin was thickly curtained against the sun-glare. Therefore the girl did not see, or else was too engrossed on her own behalf to detect her elder's agitation. All Peggy supposed was that her

beloved benefactress felt outraged by the mere suggestion of being supposed capable of unkindness.

"Yes, yes; you dearest of women. It's all right, I know. You couldn't and wouldn't, and—as always, you're my one ever loyal, best friend," so the suppliant hastened to reassure the dispenser of favours. Then, supplying explanation: "I made up my mind at Atchibal. When Cousin Ralph fished me out of the lake it made me like him better than ever. So I just handed him the will and the letter to think over at his leisure, and said I am willing if he is. It was perfectly simple"—with youthful gravity—"All the big things in life are simple, it seems to me."

"But—the other? Oh, Peggy, my own dear little girl, are you quite sure that Bruce is not still first in your heart? Don't do a wrong to a gallant, true gentleman by giving him only a second-best place. *Does he know?*"

Peggy crimsoned, choked. She drew herself up and said with a girlish dignity, before which the other bowed in fair acknowledgment:

"You may trust me to be above-board this time. I have made up my mind that there is only one man left in the world I want to marry, that is Cousin Ralph. If he doesn't want me—well and good. Out into the world I go to make my living. If he thinks me unworthy to be a loyal wife, because for one week I believed Bruce Bowman really loved me more than his pride, before he so cruelly deserted me, then Colonel Auldjo is not the right sort. That's all."

She rose, as ending the interview.

"One moment. But what do you want me to advise him, or not to say? Surely it rests between you two; not with any third."

Roma could hardly repress a cry of anguish. Why, why, ask her of all persons on earth to intervene.

"Because he most likely will be a chivalrous donkey.

Begin to air a lot of highflown ideas about my youthful years being unsuited to a battered warrior," sniffed Peggy, with indescribable pitying scorn. "Maybe he will want me to keep Cowford and everything—and be ashamed of myself all my life long. All I ask of you is to convince him it is an absolutely fair bargain. That's not much; is it?"

With which and a dramatic gesture the visitor vanished behind the curtain. It fell back into its usual folds.

"Dear Mrs. Wray, what has happened? Is it bad news?" anxiously exclaimed Nurse Lyttle, entering with some milk-food.

Roma made a valiant effort at self-command, though her lips formed a tortured smile. "Nothing but what always happens; the unexpected that might have been foreseen. *Don't ask*—my dear. Here, imagine this is a bowl of life's vinegar you have brought me, and see how, as Pollyann says, I will sup down sorrow with a spoon. Sweet are the uses of adversity, many a time my friends have reminded me. Still, one may acquire a distaste in the end to that form of saccharine."

"You can't swallow it, I can see. Don't force yourself," counselled the nurse, in an impersonal tone.

* * * * * *

Colonel Ralph Bowman-Auldjo, D.S.O., looked even more upright and gallant in bearing than usual as he strode down the bund and crossed the gangway plank of the *Pink Lotus*, where a brown attendant deeply salaamed. A brave mask the soldier wore. Yet inwardly he quaked no less than the great Turenne, who owned as much, crying out, "Messieurs, if you were as afraid as I am you would run away."

In the most shaded corner of the flower-decked, broidery-hung saloon, his looks darted to a white figure

reclining among cushions. Her attitude was so graceful above that of all her sex he ever knew, so touching in its weakness, his heart melted to wax, whilst his manhood longed to offer protection. Heretofore this lady of his secret dreams showed to his adoring gaze as a radiant star in a clear sky. But now she appeared rather as the moon shining through a rift in wreathing misty-white clouds. That bewitching thingummy (*cap*) crowning her beautiful head lent the final touch to her charm. There was a delicious intimacy in seeing a dear woman thus, no longer sparkling in diamonds to dazzle the crowd, or hatted mannishly as a comrade ready to go out for a breezy walk on the moor or a day's fishing. She was so utterly feminine, defenceless, confiding. And how exquisite the flow of line, soft purity of stuff and perfect simplicity of her—raiment ! (Common words expressing mere clothes, Ralph spurned.) How Sister Lyttle, with her unerring instinct as to the lure of fashionable fig-leaves where simple male beings are to be trapped, would have hugged herself had she known.

"I am much better, thank you." Roma's flute-like accents, sweet but faint, met her visitor half-way down the saloon, answering the genuine feeling in his deep-toned inquiries as he came forward. "Won't you take our only arm-chair ? It's too hot to shake hands."

Rebuffed at this greeting, disappointed, for his hand yearned to hold a moment those slender white fingers which he so much admired, Auldjo began groping rather dizzily in his brain to remember some one of the opening sentences he had carefully elaborated last night and rehearsed this morning. But Roma spoke again.

Hers was a peculiarly musical voice, under perfect command. She could use it as others the gift of song. Now it sounded pianissimo, though almost woundingly keen ; far, far aloof as from the clouds wherewith his imagination so lately invested her.

"It is kind and flattering of you to come and see me. Peggy has already told me to expect your visit. You wish to ask my advice."

The ground was cut from under Auldjo's feet. He stammered: "I—I—hardly know how to explain—to tell—that is ask——"

"Do not trouble to explain. I know all the circumstances," went on the crystal-clear, far-away accents.

"Having loved and in a manner mothered Peggy since her childhood, her heart is an open book to me. She has told me everything. Her mind is made up. She hopes and believes you like her. But, anticipating generous objections on your part, she suggests I should act as a kind of referee."

There followed a silence. Twice Auldjo cleared his throat.

Roma's fingers picked feebly at the fringe of a silken shawl on her lap, so dying fingers sometimes pick.

"Peggy—my cousin—is a dear little girl, whom I like very much indeed," suddenly broke out a man's voice firmly. "Also, I respect the decision about this family muddle which she arrived at. It shows right feeling and a strength of character one would not expect, judging by her looks and age. But liking is not—loving. And there may be someone else——"

"Not on her side, she assures me, at present. Ah——!"

For Auldjo sprang up. The action revealed an uncontrollable impulse to set free overstrained tension.

With intuition, the woman exclaimed, "You are speaking of yourself."

"I am. Let me make a clean breast of it—to you. That is what brought me here. Not Peggy's suggestion, which was modest simplicity itself. Hers was a mere business proposition; a prosaic, shall we say October and April mating suggestion, appearing quite workable to a crank-minded old recluse and an inexperienced

school-girl. But would you call that an ideal—a true marriage?"

Under a burning flash of eyes, Roma's fell scorched. At the strong-sounding direct appeal like the boom of an ocean roller bursting from an imprisoning cave, her being trembled. Her pale lips felt false as they murmured:

"Speaking for my—my child, Peggy's nature is so clinging, home-loving, such a marriage would suit her nature; duty and strong affection combined blend often to a love that may never have known passion, yet will endure all tests of life. . . . *But your heart is not free?*"

Ralph Auldjo sat down again heavily, and shielded his face with one hand. Rapidly, in so muffled a tone of explanation, with such spurts of long-dammed feeling his listener found it difficult to follow, he made his confession.

"All my life since boyhood one ideal of womanhood has been treasured in my mind. I pictured another half of my being, not a bride-doll to be petted and patronised until she took sober rank as the mother of my children, but a truer, purer self, an earth angel. All that was best in me would be refined, spiritualised in her. Strong, generous, loyal to death, she would be—*she is!* Such a woman lives, thank heaven! a blessing to those around her. But she does not know—or has granted me no sign that she deigns to accept my devotion."

"You love her?" was whispered.

"As my soul's queen. She will always remain throned there if even— There are many kinds of love, and my homage may still be hers if even her own lips tell me what I have every ground to fear, that for me there is no hope." The speaker paused; recovered mental grip; and slowly added:

"When a woman enjoys her full liberty as a widow; has a fortune much beyond mine; when, besides, her mother love is lavished on an orphan child, though at

her age it seems premature, would there be any room in her heart or need in daily life for a husband. . . . She is here. . . . You know her. Tell me."

Turning icy cold, sick at heart, Diana's recent words repeating themselves in her ears, Roma replied faintly: "There is none. She is your true friend. She will always be that—not more."

Auldjo rose for the second time, but stood still a moment, his head bowed. He looked down at the face that lay with averted glance, the velvet complexion, white as the pillow beneath her dear dark head; once more saw, as if looking for the last time, those finely chiselled features, the nose so transparent that the blood in its tip showed against the light, whilst its nostrils quivered sensitive to every mood of emotion. "Thank you for telling me straight. Good-bye."

Then, more erect than when he came, stiff-backed, grey-faced, with eyes straight as on parade, Ralph Auldjo went quietly out.

A little later, puzzled, pitying eyes under a white-winged cap were bent on the prostrate figure in the saloon. ("What tangle is here? A fine nurse you are, who thought yourself so clever, forsooth, at helping others.") Aloud, Sister Lyttle said in her calmest professional voice: "Time to go back to bed now, Mrs. Wray; and I'll just take your temperature."

CHAPTER XXVII

NEW LINKS

RALPH AULDJO stepped out of the *Pink Lotus* and strode forward among the young plane trees, only aware of an overpowering desire to get away—to walk and walk into the blue. His eyes were staring ahead, unseeing a girlish figure in a rocking-chair under the trees, who glanced over the edge of "Hindu Manners and Customs," by Abbé Dubois, with grave yet confident expectation.

"Hi, hi, hallo! Wait a moment. Stop a minute, Colonel," cried Brabble, ceasing from practising putting in the grove. "Don't you remember you are booked for golf in ten minutes. Mrs. Drax and Miss Peggy and I are all only waiting for you."

Auldjo, who had stopped short, consulted his watch. "In ten minutes, then," and turning on his heel, he took shelter in the *Sharp Ship*.

"He doesn't want to come, perhaps," suggested Peggy cautiously, approaching Mrs. Drax, who, cross-legged on a rug, was diligently darning her stockings, whilst Mrs. Brabble, from a large arm-chair, was reading with relish from a month-old *Truth* the past, present and future doings of Britain's aristocracy.

"Who—Ralph? If he said he'd come, he will," was the curt answer. "What he won't want is to be inter-

fered with. 'Swear unto thy neighbour and disappoint him not, though it were to thine own hindrance,' is his motto in life."

"What's that about life?" asked Brabble, coming up. "D'ye know the latest definition of it? 'One d——d thing after another.'"

Peggy looked and felt deliciously prim. These excellent souls little guessed that the supposed friendly visit which had just taken place in the *Pink Lotus* yonder was really an interview fraught with tremendous import concerning herself. How fine of Cousin Ralph to wear that stony mask, whilst his mind must be brimming with visions of all that his unexpected riches would bring him. As to herself . . . heigho . . . she likewise would wear a mask, but one sweetly smiling. With utter fortitude she would now go round the golf-course, not knowing whether this inscrutable man's decision meant work and penury to herself or a life of ease and some content in gentle submission to a middle-aged excellent husband. Joy, utter happiness—she renounced all thought of such!

"On the tick. Here's our warrior," announced Brabble gaily. "Don't dally, ladies. *Good*-bye, Mrs. Brabble," he took off his hat with a deep flourish to his placid spouse.

"Hey, Miss Peggy, may one inquire what good you have got out of your Indian studies? How will reading how Brahmins perform *puja* to a dish-god or marry one tree to another help you to do your dooty in life as a useful, happy—young lady?"

Attracted dully by the question, Auldjo looked round. Diana did so too; guessing the little man closely shaved the blunder of uttering the fatal word "*wife*."

Peggy was equal to the occasion. Sedately she replied: "I have come upon something of real value; an idea that many a girl might be thankful for who has no money or talent, and hasn't an idea what to do for her living.

Who knows but I may be glad to try it for a profession? It's to be a flatterer! The Abbé writes there was in his day an entire caste called '*Battus*,' who were professional flatterers. Their only occupation was to grovel before persons of importance and to invent the most extravagant praises of them. For which they were handsomely rewarded. It might catch on in London; so I'll begin trying it on all of you!"

"Won't you give us a sample?" asked Auldjo, stonily smiling as the others applauded the notion. "Not that there is any likelihood, I hope, of your ever being reduced to any such straits."

Peggy's lashes dropped; her colour rose. Her heart hummed: "He means I'm to keep Cowford—honourably!"

Stammeringly she burst forth: "Behold our new links. The links of Shadipore. Here are their makers, a Diana supreme in all sport, and—a—a—world-renowned physician whose aim is glorious health for himself and his friends. True that Nature provides here a grassy stretch of bund for a mile. But who was it that walked over the ground followed by attendant coolies to dibble out holes, uttering '*Uchcha*! All-right-oh!'? Who but this self-sacrificing pair? Theirs was the splendid invention of cleaving twigs and inserting therein paper flags of envelopes . . . hum . . . hum. . . ."

"Which unhappily blow away," ended Auldjo, stopping at a flagless hole. He hunted his pockets, producing a letter, from which he tore the second sheet, fixing it on the cleft stick. It bore the words:

"Wishing you all good luck,

"Yours ever,

"R. BRUCE BOWMAN."

Peggy saw. She bent over the stick as Auldjo was striding on, whipped out her handkerchief, tied it on, and rapidly secreted the scrap of paper.

"Are you coming?" called the others over their shoulders. Auldjo added as she joined them, rosy from stooping: "Not flattering that, Cousin Peggy, to think you can improve on my flag-sticking. But I forgive you, for the sake of our Shadipore golf links . . . new links," he musingly added as to himself.

("*New links*," echoed Peggy within herself.)

So they played. Diana and her podgy, energetic partner, Brabble, were easily ahead. But, as Peggy protested, how could any girl with only her German governess and invalid aged uncle as companions learn golf or bridge? She now did her best; none so badly.

As to Ralph Auldjo, he swung savagely, strode with seven-leagued boots, spoke next to nothing and overshot the holes with recurring force. A suspicion crept into his opponents' minds, and increased there: "Something is the matter with him."

Peggy, his partner, thought the same, but whilst respectful as the others of his silence, her sympathy was with his supposed mental chaos at so suddenly envisaging new responsibilities, different life—a home and greatly increased fortune. It was indeed a grave matter. If she felt it so who had pondered the situation for months, he might well be stunned having only known it some hours.

As they ended near the boats, crossing the stream in the waiting shikaras, for Doctor Brabble and Diana spoke of seeing how Roma was doing, Auldjo would have turned off brusquely for the relief of getting away alone at last behind the hills when he saw Peggy's clear eyes fixed upon him.

He paused; hesitated; then, left alone together in the grove, said clumsily: "You wish to speak to me?"

The girl answered with grave simplicity: "I thought you might wish to speak to me."

As Auldjo stood silent, Peggy went on, modest and

reasonable, in an impersonal tone. "We spoke of family business yesterday. To-day you have seen my aunt and consulted with her about—well, about me, I suppose. Without wishing to be in the least in any hurry, I shall be glad to know what future to look forward to when you —as the head of the family—have made up your mind."

"Ah, yes! it is business," repeated Auldjo heavily. How could he tell this waiting pretty girl her name had scarcely been mentioned except by Roma; thought of her hardly crossed his mind since yesterday?

"More than mere business. It means my life, you see."

The man of forty odd years, looking down at the slight, serious figure, felt his lips twitch. Life! Her young life that lay so long and shining ahead. Was he, a well-nigh stranger, its arbiter? And what of his life? She took small heed of that time-frayed, battered remnant, he fancied, dear egotist! Just like a child.

"*You are so young,*" came from him unawares.

Then as Peggy pouted, slightly huffed, he suddenly said, forcing back his well-nigh overmastering yearning for the relief of solitude:

"Come for a little walk with me. We must not go far, as you are not quite strong yet."

A hamlet looked spilt across the track they took, in mutual indifference as to where it led. Crazy mud-brick and weather-stained wooden dwellings jostled each other anyhow, incorrigible idlers peered out of upper rest-rooms that were like open verandahs, utterly naked small boys stood staring below, among fowl, stray diminutive cattle and sweet-scented poisonous datura in white blossom. By a low door, not unlike that of a kennel, a young woman seated on the mud floor within looked with brilliant, long gaze at the unheeding white man. She was dirty but beautiful, with level, dark brows, square features and dark hair showing under her blue head-shawl. Her arms

were massed with silver bangles, her ears heavily borne down by huge silver rings. A puny brown baby was at her breast.

Peggy looked—attracted by the face, repelled by the degraded surroundings. That a woman's life! To sit in the dust and nurse poverty-stricken offspring. Her spirit leapt upward seeking higher environment, larger airs, mistily gleaming goals. With a comrade like this by her side, the best in her might sprout and grow unchecked, the lower nature keep its lower place.

Beside the hamlet a sun-baked slope, haunted by pi-dogs, was studded with small jagged gravestones. Next this, within a bamboo palisade shaded by magnificent plane trees, mouldered a picturesque wooden temple with carved panels and doors and moss-grown, curved roofs, the topmost upraised on pillars. A sacred peepul, planted doubtless behind it when the edifice was built, had thriven and thrown out far-reaching branches. The temple, meanwhile, grew old and decaying; some of its pendent ornaments had rotted away, whilst dirt and rubbish now foully heaped the enclosed ground.

In disgust Peggy turned her head aside, her well-ordered *petite bourgeoise* mind revolting against the filth and squalor of the valley-dwellers, however lovely their mountains and many waters. A yearning came upon her for the trim cottages of Cowford, ankle-deep in flowers, for the clean-pinafored children, the buxom, hard-working women.

"Horrible!" She sniffed the tainted air, startling her companion, who, apologising, hastily took a cow-track towards open pasturage.

Presently Auldjo found a shady seat beneath a big tree, the ground sloping away to a mound all snowy and scented with white iris. Auldjo knew it for one of the old country cemeteries, but Peggy regarded it in unsuspecting satisfaction. With youth's easy grace she curled on the sward. More heavily the man perched on a ridgy tree-

root, looking sideways down on the girlish figure. Heavy in heart, heavy in head, he struggled dully against the benumbing gloom that weighted him, reminding himself he must play the game; get this matter over, decently, in fairness to this She-babe. (How he longed to smoke! But at a marriage interview!—Impossible.)

Peggy waited, conscious of slight agitation, yet rather hopeful. Out of his mental darkness Auldjo strove to speak fairly, and began:

"You—lamb! Do you realise that you are skipping up asking your middle-aged cousin if he ought not to shear off your white fleece? Come. You love it and are so snug in it. Why not let us arrange for you to keep and enjoy all its cosiness—I mean Cowford. Why should any woman want to be harnessed beside a stiff old stager like me?" His tone took on a bitter sadness. "Not likely. For form's sake I can take over the old place, but only to hand it back as a deed of gift to you, to satisfy that terribly troublesome conscience you possess. Then you will be free in future to marry the man of your choice. Will that suit you?"

"No! No! No!" uttered Peggy vehemently. She turned up an outraged face, her lips tightly compressed yet quivering, her eyes scornful. "If it is yours—take it all! I refuse to be treated as an object of charity. I'm not going to creep round ashamed of myself my whole life, feeling I've ousted you; and you a man who has done his best for his country and who will never be rich (or so I suppose) even with his pension. You understand—you take me and Cowford if you like, or else you take *it*—and I'm young and will work for myself."

Like a gust of fresh wind the girl's outburst blew aside the fog enveloping the unhappy man. Staggered, he stared, putting his hand to his head.

"Dear child," he said, low and humbly. "The unfairness to yourself of what you suggest is what appals me.

Think ! When I am an aged dotard, wheeled round in a donkey-chair, you will be still on the sunny side of the hill. Besides, though I am free—it is only fair to tell you that I have loved deeply, and that—that memory may always remain first with me."

" Thank you for telling me. It is only to be expected, considering your years," said Peggy low, poking the grass with a forefinger. " That makes it easier to confess, as I ought, that I've been engaged too, for about a week. Let me see—one—two—three——"

" Don't count the days. Why was it broken off ? "

" Because—oh, no more young men for me ! " Peggy clenched an angry little fist. " It's ' *I adore you—Come to heel ! I choose you for my girl. Jolly glad and grateful you ought to be. All the same you're avaricious and contemptible and altogether beneath me in loftiness and fine character and*——' Oh, thank goodness ! that madness is over. Pride, selfishness, tyranny ! those I've escaped." Then in a small voice : " I'll tell you his name if you wish me to."

" No, no. Why distress yourself ? Only, are you quite sure he is gone out of your heart ? You seem to care still a little."

" In this way. He came like—well, like a buzzing aeroplane I'd never seen before, plump down into my garden. And just when he'd assured me how lovely it would be to fly together over the world and I believed him—Puff ! he changes his mind and whirrs up and away, leaving me standing there. Of course I care still a little, seeing the mess his machine made trampling down all the plants. . . . But they're holding their heads up again."

Auldjo's lips twitched under his moustache.

" Yet—there are many better men and many years to come. Ah ! supposing, little lady, you were mine and yet some other stole unawares to yourself into your innocent heart ? "

"When I'd given it you to keep; besides my word of honour, or what-d'ye-call it to be true and loyal? Catch anyone try it on!" Peggy's eyes shot sparks. "I'd just say one word to the intruder—'Go!' And if he didn't, I'd warn you: 'Burglar! Look out!'"

"It seems simple." Ralph Auldjo's voice was grave, but his eyes were less miserable, even faintly amused. After all—after all—must he be self-condemned to live solitary, joyless, to and through old age? Why reject, however sad in soul, the cheering companionship of this sweet-hearted, pretty creature, whose pleasing prattle would surely be a solace, if not now yet in days to come.

"Margaret! Are you resolved to take me as your guardian friend in life—which in any case you will always find me to be—but also for your husband?"

"I am. There was and will be only one young man for me. And that's over. But you, as Auntie Roma agrees with me—and so does Aunt Diana, who has known you for years—you are the very nicest old (I beg your pardon!) old*er* man I'm ever likely to meet."

"Then—it's a bargain." Auldjo stooped to take Peggy's sunbrowned hand. He raised it to his lips! "To-morrow we will talk more over all this."

Perfectly pleased with this respectful homage, the betrothed damsel got up with a slight scramble, due to her hobble skirts, and both prepared to return. Suddenly Auldjo espied the houseboat's shikara, laden with water-jars, in the nullah and hailed it with a shout. "That is better. You don't like the dirty village. Will you excuse me if I go for a long stretch of a walk? Thank you."

At last! Then he smoked.

CHAPTER XXVIII

COUSINS

"COUSIN RALPH."

"Little Peggy?"

The latter person squirmed inwardly, longing but not liking to tell this kind elder that it was really disagreeable to be called "little." She was not really so very small in stature. *The other* seldom termed her little, and Bruce was taller than his colonel. It meant she was insignificant. Ah, yes! probably that was it. She wanted to resent, but told herself to bear submissively the man's implied superiority.

"You said yesterday we would talk over things to-day; so I am ready."

A limpid, cool glance at the lolling figure opposite in an easy cane chair, cigarette in hand, newspaper on knee, criticised slightly reproachfully his attitude in so important a consultation. Feeling hers was the really practical mind, the girl with gentle firmness took the initiative—Cousin Ralph was just a chivalrous, cultured and gentle-hearted dreamer.

"The main point now is, when do you think of coming home for good?"

Auldjo started. His jaw dropped, he stared aghast. Then he recovered himself, sat forward, quiet but alert.

"What about my regiment?"

"O-oh! You would not leave it?" came in a surprised murmur. "Would you not take up new duties, work at your own home?"

"Work? Like your grand-uncle? His chief work, as I remember, was trying to grow asparagus, that would not take to Cowford soil. Would you wish me to try asparagus for my remaining years?" The speaker squared his shoulders, his eye lighting, the call of the cavalry trumpets in his ears. Then smiling with a fatherly indulgence on the reddening maid: "My dear child, you make me imagine how in Roman times a centurion on the Great Wall in Britain might have been urged by his fair betrothed to return home to rich, peaceful Umbria; to enjoy his vines and fig trees and till the paternal acres with sleek bullocks. What of the barbarians always trying to steal up, to attack an unguarded post?"

"But—other—men think it good work to plough the land and reap; even young, able men." (Oh, memory of another Ralph Bowman, who yearned for the smell of the tilled fields.) "And—in time—they—I mean the Government—will force you to retire from the army."

"A nasty reminder. Still there are some of my best years left. My country has entrusted me with a soldier's task; that is my duty until I am disabled or too aged, as army age counts. Listen, dear; every man knows his job. I've chosen mine. When that's over, there may be politics—brain-work of some kind—not asparagus."

"*Then——!*"

That syllable held Peggy's world. A ruined world. Theatre backgrounds, illusory screens flung down, hurtling in chaos—Oh, disappointment! bewildered inability to foresee any carefully ordered future!

Auldjo threw his cigarette away, laid the newspaper folded neatly on the grass, and opening Peggy's parasol,

handed it to her, for the sun was stealing round through the chenar boughs.

"Listen. It would be criminal to my mind for a man not already married to take a bride up to a frontier station like ours. There may—this is private, but you are to be trusted—there may be a rising this year. Even if it is fended off, there are always little brushes. A friend of mine, well and strong, left his wife one morning lately, in half an hour was called to go out after two or three marauders. He was riding down one, who shot him. Another, one of my best pals, came up to see me; we were on horseback going down a pass with our pickets out—simply chatting and smoking—when he was spotted by an Afghan from behind some rock and reeled in the saddle at my side, dead. No. Till the regiment is moved south in a year or so, no risks for you. Last night I thought it over carefully. You must be free and happy. Go back, when it pleases you and your—your aunt. Rule at Cowford as my agent with fullest powers. Spend freely on yourself—mind, that is first clause in our bargain—but lay by what's over for property improvement. Afterwards——"

"Afterwards?" Peggy's cheeks were paled, her lips parted, her breath fluttering a little. All this was so new.

"Well. Either you come out to me *if you are still of the same mind.* Or else—you would hardly understand, but there are possibilities: the great *They* might move their humble servant higher up, or elsewhere. We shall see. Don't let us try to crack next year's nuts, Peggy-kin."

Rosy, plump hands pressed each other nervously; hands of a capable housewife that could sew and had cured bacon, and shown an incapable cook how to bake barley scones.

"You said—as your agent. That means—you

consider—Cowford is not really mine." It came with a rush; wrung from the soul. What? no claim! No right to seem generous in showing that letter, in travelling thousands of miles to find another heir and of free will endow him with all one's beloved earthly possessions.

"My poor child. Is my opinion so bitter? And yet I must speak what seems to me the truth. And, unless I am greatly mistaken, Margaret Lee can bear to hear it. . . . That's right."

For after a pause, the quivering face opposite compressed its Cupid's bow of a mouth tight and looked bravely straight at the supplanter.

"Do you know that my father used laughingly to say that old Peregrine had forfeited the right to our family property of Cowford. As a boy I foolishly repeated this to the old gentleman when staying with him. He did not forgive me—at least then. That—not birds'-nesting—was the real cause of my being sent off next morning in dire disgrace. My father knew—I told him."

"But how. Was not my uncle the direct heir?"

"Yes. But our tenure of the property is the question. It goes back to most ancient days. The Cowford lands were bestowed upon one Ralph Bowman in the Crusades in consideration that his heir should always bear arms, or have borne arms, besides being ready to equip and lead forth twenty stout bowmen when called upon in his liege lord's service. And every man of our ancestors has been in the army until Cowford came to your uncle."

"He *couldn't!* Why, I could draw a bow and lead out the labourers better myself," uttered Peggy. "Oh, I never knew. No one told me. . . . So then—of course! —I—am—nobody."

"*What?* Now don't play the martyr, child! Don't rush to extremes. It is not worthy of the conscientious, high-minded only daughter of our house. We all look up to our Peggy with pride—at least, I do, and the few

left of our name certainly will when I let them know how nobly she has acted."

A rush of tears changed the aquamarine depths of his listener's eyes to liquid silver. Ralph Auldjo smiled on her with fatherly encouragement. He little guessed his betrothed was bitterly recalling how cruelly different had been the verdict on her conduct of the other Ralph.

"Being proud of our name, however simple its origin, and brought up in this tradition, how else can I feel, dear? But I am sorry."

A brief pause to allow these emphatically uttered words to sink in, then Auldjo hurried on more lightly.

"It must be owned, the old man seems to show feeble-mindedness in this rather dotty epistle. Here it is again and the will. Not one syllable about your just dowry. As his nearest of kin, you and I ought surely to arrange that in fairness as he would have done if in sound mind."

"I have my mother's money. My father was in the navy, and got drowned after saving two sailors out of a capsized boat's crew. Uncle used to refer to him as a seafaring gentleman without sixpence; or a penniless mariner. It used to make me boil inside."

"Forget the sneer. Why not put up a brass to your father's memory as a hero in Cowford church? But as to your mother's little share, that was her right. What about yours as your uncle's adopted daughter. If he had married and reared eight or nine younger children they must all have had their portions. An only daughter naturally gets the lot. That's fair."

"But that would be—thousands! Besides he mightn't have had nine children."

Peggy's eyes blinked rapidly, suspicious of tasting bitter alms if she swallowed the proffered spoonful of "nice, good-for-you" nutriment. "Besides it would drain Cowford estate."

"Estates grow rushes if they are not drained properly. You must economise as my agent, that's all, and let us feel we are setting your old uncle's conscience at rest. Nine children at £2,000 each—lying out at interest—say £20,000," replied the elder cousin, in apparently dispassionate calculation, secretly hoping devoutly Peggy's guilelessness might be proof against further strain.

"Now what about the Dower House? A vague remembrance of it comes back to me. A diamond-paned, rambling cottage set between an orchard and a garden sloping to the river."

"Old Cowford. It's a gem. Real early Tudor, while the new house is only Elizabethan. In its way it's far more perfect, you know, and strangers beg the curate or his caretaker to let them see it. It has real old flagged paths in the garden, do you know, besides a stone dovecote in the field." Peggy's eyes sparkled, her impressive gravity over the flagstones was delicious.

"Ah, the dovecote. Hasn't it a revolving ladder inside so as to rob the nests all round the walls easily? One of the very few surviving in England. I was on that ladder every day. One old ancestor stood a two days' siege in our dovecote—they were only allowed as strongholds to men of substance or lords of the manor and because also the pigeons ruined the poorer men's crops. Well, Old Cowford belongs for life, anyway, to the widow or unmarried daughter of the Bowmans. It is yours by rights. Not that you need turn out the curate whilst you please to live in Cowford Manor House."

Peggy gasped. "Do you—really—truly mean it? Is it *fair!* . . . Oh—oh! Fräulein will just weep all down her black chicken-apron for joy at the idea of ending her days there. She says 'Ach! Ach!' over it every time she goes there, till she is aching. And

the darling, good frump has been such an anxiety to me. She won't go back to Germany, where nobody is left that cares for her, and she hates leaving me, but would rather teach till she was eighty than be a burden. That does take a load off my mind."

"Glad to hear it. Now, if we have pretty well thrashed out the rest of our harvest of cares, a round on the golf-course with friend Brabble might freshen me." Auldjo stood up stretching himself. Then, remembering a kindly postscript, so to speak: "By the way, when do you go up for your Gulmarg gaieties? Sorry I forgot to ask sooner."

"I—I—promised before we . . . Do you not mind?" A newly-betrothed Peggy flushed shamefacedly at seeming to suggest her affianced husband might wish for her company. "Aunt Roma is so unselfish. She says Mrs. Brabble and the doctor will be company enough for her."

Auldjo misunderstood. He saw merely a pretty young creature, delighting in her first taste of society's amuse ments (that bored him more often than not). So with genial heartiness he made haste to relieve her from fears of selfishness on his part.

"Mind? Of course not. Go by all means and enjoy yourself. Nothing like a merry time so long as you do like it. My fun will be sitting up at night in a tree watching for bears, or scrambling up mountain-sides after markor. Mrs. Drax settled last night to be off in two days, and I'm joining her."

"O-oh! That's settled." Peggy scrutinised a juvenile frog on the ground. There are millions such in Kashmir, hopping over all grass banks and never seeming fewer, never appearing older. She felt hurt at not being consulted, yet too respectful to remonstrate.

"Yes. I'd promised before coming here. We are old pals from childhood, like brother and sister. The man who

was coming with me chucked it at the last moment; couldn't afford it this year, for some reason. By the way, he's a cousin too; Ralph Bruce Bowman. Mrs. Wray amused me by saying you both thought for some days his surname was Bruce. How did you like him?"

"I—liked him," muttered Peggy. "And he liked me. I thought, until he knew who I was—exactly. Then he would have nothing to say to me. A grasping, purse-proud heiress!—that's how he apparently considered me."

"What! Bruce? But he can be a queer chap; shy of most women and all heiresses. At any rate, I hope you will get on better with him in future, Peg-top. He is safe to make amends for my sake; we are true, tried pals."

So saying, Auldjo, whose eye had caught signals from a flannelled, podgy figure wagging a putter, moved away, unconsciously taking a brisker air. The young betrothed girl noticed as much. She went slowly towards the house-boat with drooping head.

In the saloon Roma Wray was once more established, "sitting up." But it was a different chair, in another corner, and she wore her everyday black tea-gown. With never a word said Nurse Lyttle arranged all details differently from last time; even——

"What has happened to the chairs and tables?" exclaimed Peggy, entering. "They look as if they had all been romping in a kitchen lancers and stopped in the middle. And—oh, you Paddy! three of the embroidered covers are upside-down."

"Anything for a change, is my motto for convalescents. It's a nursing trick. And don't you pretend you're an old maid," returned the Irishwoman cheerfully.

"Well, I'm not yet. And it seems as if I wasn't to be in the future, either, auntie."

With the awkward boldness of inner shyness nerving itself to the avowal, Peggy kissed the invalid's cheek.

Roma's arms were outspread instantly, drawing down

the almost reluctant girl to her close embrace. "My dear one! Is it all settled, then? My best heart-wishes."

"Yes, the bargain is fixed up. Don't be slipping away, Sister; it's not a secret. My cousin the colonel and I are agreed to share our inheritance. 'Barkis is willing' but wants me to wait a year, dance my fling, and be quite sure of my own mind. Then we're to be spliced, if Mrs. Drax hasn't shot him in mistake for a bear or a Pathan potted him."

"Oh—Margaret!"

The invalid's sensitive face seemed washed by a wave of emotion. The nurse's trained gaze dwelt on both.

"Not any more talk, please. Time for your medicine, Mrs. Wray, and I'll just take your temperature."

Sister Lyttle promptly gagged her patient with a tube and whisked through the curtains. Roma freed her tongue immediately and spoke with earnest anxiety.

"One word, my darling child. Do you love each other?"

Peggy withdrew into herself with an almost scandalised air, reddening.

"Of course. We ought to—being lonely only cousins, besides engaged. It's . . . it's not as if we were *both* young. But I am serious; and he is a man to be really trusted to behave all right."

"Is that all? My little Peggy!"

"Oh, if you mean *lovering*, I'm done with that!" Peggy flung out her hands; her eyes darkened. "No: thank goodness Cousin Ralph does not nauseate me, nor require fulsome sentimentality."

The nurse re-entered. The patient stealthily replaced the tube; her temperature was taken.

CHAPTER XXIX

ALONE IN THE VALLEY

ALONE.

Roma Wray looked out of the window of her floating house with a vivid consciousness that she was alone ; not only living by herself here in a Kashmir valley, but alone, as a human unit in our world, itself an insignificant planet in a solar system, seemingly swamped among hosts of other revolving starry circles. A curious sensation. She dwelt upon it, trying to realize its truth ; to taste and retain its inner savour. Altogether different from feeling lonely, as sometimes she felt in life when pining secretly in her pleasant English home for some true comrade to share her thoughts, walks, to give her daily mental companionship higher than that which her maid, kindly, homely Pollyann, could supply.

No ; here at Ganderbal in the Sind Valley Roma was relieved at finding herself alone, with no watchful eyes to note, to probe the secret of her sadness, when suddenly, in the midst of writing, her hand would pause in mid-air till the ink dried on the pen unheeded ; or a book might slide from her fingers whilst her eyes stared into vacancy ; or even her best-loved occupation, embroidery, ceased to soothe, and the needle remained half-drawn through a filet square. Her late friends were all dispersed, like so many particles that had crystallised momentarily into a group now disintegrated by stronger attractions. Peggy was on the Gulmarg links ; the Brabbles gone up-river to

see Islamabad and its surroundings; Diana Drax was encamped somewhere in the wilds, with Colonel Auldjo not far off. Sister Lyttle was back at her hospital-work.

And so this summer afternoon Roma sat utterly alone in the *Pink Lotus*, that was moored far up a solitary nullah in a willow grove. Broken bars of sunshine filtered through the jade-green slender boughs, dappling the grass with moving shadows, as light mountain airs swayed the willow-plumes. When an evening breeze sprang up with the cooled air of sundown, how the boughs swished and rustled, all blown sideways, showing their pale under-surfaces in disarray, like the plumage of storm-tossed birds. Even little David, who was left in Roma's charge, failed her nowadays, having made friends with other children in a boat on the main stream, and they spent mornings and evenings romping gleefully together under the shade of Ganderbal's famous chenars.

"It's a mercy he'll not be adulterated by mixing with low-born ones," said Pollyann in grim satisfaction, who selfishly considered herself David's supreme guardian, even battling with her beloved mistress over the relative merits of tapioca or rice puddings. She herself on these outings also enjoyed the company of an English nurse. So daily the little man rode off on a diminutive tat led by a syce, his bearer gravely accompanying them with an armful of toy animals, Pollyann marshalling the group, as befitted her unfailing sense of having been born and brought up in a British regiment.

The syce looked unusually gay this day; whereby hangs a tale. A week before, with hanging head, he had appeared salaaming in humble entreaty that Lady-sahib would gladden him by the gift of a new shirt. Alas! his second one, that after washing he had spread yesterday to dry on the cook-boat roof, was gone. Stolen, doubtless, by one of the towing-coolies, presumably him who possessed only a pantry glass-cloth round his loins. *Yessir*.

Mrs. Wray announced herself tired of replacing stolen shirts, the tale being stale. Yet, relenting at his hangdog appearance, she suddenly remembered a faded yellow crape gown denounced by Pollyann as a useless rag, but washable.

The syce's eyes gleamed with pleasure at the prize, which he bore off hugging it, to be altered by the tailor, for of course his wife could no more sew than any other Kashmiri woman. It is old men or boys whom one sees plying needles, mending garments occasionally or making skull-caps, whilst the women are steering the boats or nursing their innumerable babies.

To-day Veraswami announced with his air of a sarcastic jackdaw: "Sultanah wants show new shirt him wearing to missus."

Outside stood a coy syce radiant in a yellow garment. "Look, Lady-sahib, got five pockets," he proudly uttered.

The yellow crape gown was transformed into a weird coat, piped and lined with faded green linen that Roma recognised as the discarded boat-awning she had told the servants to throw away. Her lips curved humorously; then she sighed, wishful to share the amusement with somebody. Ah! *he* would have smiled in grave instant appreciation, if only he were here. In spite of his inner devotion to Diana, so unsuspected by lookers-on, he had never failed to share all her, Roma's, small jokes, seeing eye to eye with her in keen relish.

"Veraswami! Order the shikara," she called, rousing herself.

The mid-day heat had been great, in spite of the willow shade, but now the sun was declining and at all times the snow-fed stream ran icy-cold, cooling the surface air. In loops the nullah curved by the willow fringe of the grassy glades, with here a gleam of white tents pitched under chenars, further a newly arrived houseboat silently appeared since yesterday, perhaps to slide away as quietly

to-morrow. Round a crowded bend a jam of brown native boats, and strong smells came from mud hovels huddled beside the water's brink among bushes with scarce a few inches of riverside pathway.

Near the spring bubbling from beneath the roots of a giant tree where all houseboat shikaras come to fill their water-jars, Roma landed for a solitary stroll. She could see the main Sind river and its bridge half a mile away, with the long-drawn string of houseboats under the dark massed line of chenars that is called Park Lane. But here reigned comparative solitude over the close-cropped pasture, and the softly waving maize-fields with green, half-grown plumes and the shining wet, vividly green paddy stretches.

All afternoon a droning singing had sounded from these, a mile or more away, and now the listener could distinguish how a leader chanted a strophe, replied to by some thirty copper-backed stooping figures, transplanting their future winter's food with toil but marvellous cheerfulness.

Next Roma paused to watch a crone twisting thread from a distaff as she crouched under a tree. Like millions before and beside her she had grown up to bear children in her teens, then to spend her remaining strength pounding rice, paddling heavy craft. Now the throat, clasped by a coral necklace, was wizened into angles, her wrists were so shrunken that their massive twain silver bracelets must soon adorn some grandchild bride. Yet her beady black eyes twinkled with life-zest as she glanced up from under a soiled linen head-cloth at the Feringhee lady.

"Strange!" mused Roma. "I, with so much, yet disheartened. She, seemingly satisfied with what life has brought. Can it be that the simple animal desires to exist and pass on the life-gift have been granted and sufficed her? We of higher civilization feel the like need, besides craving more. A spiritual yearning is added to know that we have climbed heights and gained a wider

outlook, of purer airs; that we ourselves are the stronger for the hardships endured on life's journey; been burden-bearers and burden-sharers, cheering on others as some have cheered us."

Crossing the meadows, Roma presently reached the main Sind stream, swirling below in a grey, snow-swollen current. A cold air blew refreshingly from the near background of mountains, sharply outlined with edges pine-jagged against the evening sky, their inaccessible reddish flanks softened on the ridges as by emerald velvet cloaks of sward flung there by gods at play. Beyond rose peaks of yet higher snow-crested giants, mostly swathed in storm-shrouds. Clouds floated across the hillsides, in beautiful contrast with a heavily purplish banked sky, and as Roma sat down on the bank a ground thrush burst into rich, clear notes, not the rapture of the Western songster, yet still a delight.

As the bird ceased, the listener became surprisedly aware of a distant roar of hill-waters filling the supposed silence for whoso had ears to hear its hoarse music.

So utterly Roma rested, soothing her soul through sight and sound, the snow-breeze fanning her face, that she started sharply at the voice of a herdsman behind. "Salaam, huzoor." The man curiously regarded the stranger-woman who could thus idle luxuriously. Like all Kashmiris, to lie in the sun and do nothing was his idea of happiness, and truly few mortals practise it more frequently. At present he sauntered after his puny chocolate-coloured cows lest these, grazing on the under-mined bank, should slip with dislodged foothold into the rushing flood, thus ending their lives sacred to Shiva.

Roused, the sitter took a letter from her pocket to re-read it for the third time. ("Now for a chat with my Peggy.") Her eyes strove by staring to get at the un-written essence of the words; they visualised a girl's tawny

head and rosy-white face, watched the plump, capable hand forming the letters. And yet—no more came than a clever sketch traced by Peggy's pen-tip. Hers was at times the gift that flows alive from brain and heart along nerves of arm and hand conveying to the reader the writer's own feeling. So, from her dull schoolroom in her former lonely girlhood, Peggy had often written to her benefactress and best friend when Roma was in London or travelling abroad. But now—something was missing.

"Gulmarg is a wide desolate saucer, with a wall of mountains all round and pine trees under them trying to climb the heights. The mountains are white with snow, sifted thick as cake-sugar on the tops and trickling down their sides. Over all is a grey sky gloomy enough to give one the blues when it isn't a broken rain reservoir. Such rain! It streams in an unceasing drenching sheet. But we *won't* care—so put on our oldest rags and squelch round the links doing two rounds of golf. The whole plateau means golf-links, criss-crossed with telegraph wires, besides being studded with huts in little fenced gardens. Crows keep swooping on the chickens; two evenings ago a leopard killed a fowl; and bears are reported on the circular road at nights, or I'd like to ride there alone when it gets dusk. But we go in parties. Indoors one grows chilblains on the nose when it rains: yesterday the sun was so scorching one dreaded prickly-heat. And it is golf, golf, and nothing but golf till night! Then we dance at the hotel. My friends here are so fearfully pleased at my engagement that I seem to have done the right thing at last. Even Mrs. Blackadder thinks it worth while to put a chair for me beside herself, and kindly informed me between a toothsome smile and renunciatory sigh that formerly my cousin Ralph had been one of her most infatuated 'friends.'

"She sweetly hoped that this would cause me no silly

jealousy. 'At his age! Certainly not,' I assured her. 'What happened so long ago is ancient history.'"

The letter went on to outline a plan for camping at Pailgaum for a fortnight and thence going over the pass to Sonnamarg, in which Peggy's new friends wished her to join. She only hesitated "lest you, my darling old auntie, will feel too horribly deserted. But why not join us? Every one says there is nothing so enjoyable as camping in Kashmir. I'd love to have you, and so would the others, I am sure."

Roma's lips bunched in doubt; she gave her head a slight shake like a high-mettled horse, objecting mentally. "Not they—after some days. Every decade makes a difference. The child trundling a hoop believes that her sister in teens is a true playmate. But the elder gets bored with a past phase and the younger feels there is something wanting. In life's troubles or real work, Peggy and I can meet, but not in our pastimes."

Dismissing instantly any least thought of quitting her present quiet solitude, Roma turned back to the sentence concerning Ralph Auldjo, frowning to herself. "At his age . . . ancient history . . . of no interest to his promised young wife." A sharp, short sigh escaped her. Ah, *she* could feel retrospectively jealous that his fine head had ever bowed in even momentary adoration before so merely handsome a goddess. She, Roma Wray, alas! longed to know any and all the past events of the man's life who was nothing, or ought to be nothing—nothing at all to her!

With a leap, none being by to be astonished, she was on her feet and walking swiftly back to the boat by a rough path through the Indian corn. So engrossed was she that only by some subconscious warning she stopped dead—Had she or not seen a whiplike, black and silver thing flash across a foot ahead on the path? More cautious now she watched for snakes, until the barking

of pi-dogs half-tamed announced the village hovels and her lazily resting boatmen.

It was sunset when the boat reached the willow grove. And because the trees on both sides hid out all view, Roma went ashore through the slender stems and out on a grassy mead, beyond which ran a little-used road bounding the far-reaching vivid green flatness of paddy-fields.

What a delicious ring of sward was this, springy underfoot, aromatic with sage, thyme and crisp grass that crunched under even her light tread. The great chenar trees that ringed in the glade may have been planted in the days of the Moghuls—blessings on those great sovereigns whose love of noble groves, gardens, and poplar avenues is still a delight to white travellers nowadays in far, fair Kashmir! Now a group of women glided by on the grass-grown road-track, soft-footed, loudly chattering, with lemon-coloured or rose-pink draperies showing their Hindu race, here the upper caste. Overhead in the paling blueness storm-clouds were piled majestically, shaping the enormous masses peculiar to Kashmir; peculiar, too, their sharpness of edges. Here are none of the domestic-looking sheep herds that whiten softly an English sky; instead, at sundown, fawn-hued furs lie aspread overhead, stealing away like the wild creatures they seem to represent.

"Yes. It is good to be alone here," thought Roma as she paced to and fro, whilst the cold, snow-sweet air of evening refreshed her mind and body. "Alone to gather strength; to face my future life more clearly than for years I have cared or dared to do. Then to go forward—alone."

A slight man's figure was outlined against the willow darkness. Veraswami approached with his light step of a middle-aged but still agile hill-boy. "Master David done gone supper," he uttered, like shots from a respectful popgun.

And Roma remembered duty, however light, for hers was to hear the child's evening prayer. As she entered, Pollyann was proclaiming a hymn-verse in the manner of a town-crier, which David was repeating in snatches as suited his fancy, thus :

"Lord of grace,
Oh, give me in Zy love a *plate*."

Then in a rapid and urgent under-gabble resolved with faith to put in a supplication himself. ("And wis lots of gravy on it.")

CHAPTER XXX

UPSTREAM

"OOPUR" (upstream), ordered Roma, as she settled herself against the boat-cushions one evening.

How the days had stolen by in linked groups of weeks. Hand in hand, their sunny faces had shone hotter, myriads of mosquitoes buzzing round them, hundreds of tiny frogs hopping away underfoot. The hoopoe nestlings, scarce fledged when first the *Pink Lotus* mooring ropes were tied round the willows, now pranked as brownly glossy, dark-barred and fan-crested as their parents. Roma only recognized one this morning as she sat writing under a Robinson Crusoe mat-shelter in the grove because it hopped almost over her feet squawking. On which another bird, diligently jabbing a long bill into the grass on the chance of spearing a grub, struck food and, hurrying towards the crying youngster, transferred a morsel into the gaping beak that closed rapturously, only to reopen and begin again a rapacious "Tweak! Tweak!" Blue kingfishers were even more tame, and one now perched by rights on the gangway rope with heavy head bent in Izaak Walton patience, watching the grey stream into which he plunged suddenly at times with a startling *plop*.

The Lady-sahib was about to order a start when a puttee-legged, khaki-coated postman appeared striding

along the bank, and delivered letters with a truly Kashmiri air of benevolence not undeserving of reward. How opportune. Roma saw one was from Peggy, another addressed in Diana Drax's masculine neat writing; this other from brother Philip; the rest, local chits.

Like a child she put aside the tit-bits to the last, just as loud woe resounded through the grove, and the powerful figure of the cook-boat owner's brother-in-law staggered into view, led by a small nephew and escorted by his aged aunt. The big man was holding one hand to his ear and sobbing like a sorrowful porpoise.

"Has he been stung, or bitten by a snake? Quick, Veraswami; ask!"

With the light, unwilling sidling of a house-cat the Indispensable obeyed; returning with quite a different expression, difficult to describe. But it struck his mistress that if a bird can ever be said to sneer, then he was that sneering blackbird.

"Him beaten by little sister. They done comfort him."

"We-ll!" ejaculated the Western woman. "*Oopur.*" The boatmen plied their spade-shaped paddles and the shikara glided round a river-curve as Roma opened the least promising of her correspondence on mean paper. It was from the boat-agent, likewise leather merchant, who, amongst various other trades, hired out servants, and whom she had scolded soundly for sending her the incorrigibly lazy rascal now howling in the distance.

It ran:

"RESPECTED LADY, 19th july.

"Your extremed favour duly to hand, and I am very sorry that you have been vexed, the reason of that is this that I was not in a good condition for which I beg to pardon. I beg to pen these few lines in due hopes

that Rasid the chokidar will you now give work throuhly. The price of his wages you have authority to settle as you please. If he doese dishonesty Please excuse me as he is a child. My salaams,

" Yrs. ffly.,

" SABHANA. Boatman."

A lovely evening and by good luck a solitary stream. The silvery leaves of the willows seemed to have caught and held fast the day's long hot sunshine, with which their narrow blades still shone. Cattle were feeding in the dappled shade of the willow belts. As Roma's fingers opened Peggy's letter with consciously loving carefulness, her eyes yet gave the woodland a quick-searching glance so as to lose no sight of the rare birds that were always a delight. Ah! a small pair darted across the water ahead, shrilly squeaking; there was a flash of white breasts and russet backs like burning coals. Peggy wrote:

" Here we are aloft at lovely Sonnamarg; resting after our marches. Coming over some snow-bridges was a bit thrilling, as the dandy-bearers had so little space they tried to walk single file. I was last as least, by which time the track was so broken away that my dandy swayed violently whilst the coolies tried not to slip over the edge. All's well . . . etc. The flowers here grow simply in prodigal profusion. Blue poppies, wild wallflowers, potentilla, larkspur and plenty of lovely strangers. I counted up to sixty-three varieties, then gave up tired. Don't be surprised if we march down by the week-end. Meantime, everyone has a different plan for the next few days, and each is resolved to be biggest martyr, so champions the other's cause. I am thinking of playing at selfishness, so as to please the rest by feeling themselves nobly self-sacrificing.

Isn't life funny, in the sense of being odd? I mean to laugh at everything that comes henceforward. Much better than to do the other thing. Now and for months to come,

"Your sunburnt, loving,
"PEGGY."

("Laugh at everything that comes henceforward! . . . Oh, you dear, little-dreaming, innocent child!")

Roma's thoughts glanced fearfully backward at the hideous memories of what married life had brought herself. Then she roused. Nay, nay, with Ralph Auldjo the girl she loved would indeed be as protected as any mortal can hope to be. And here was Diana's letter still unread. Half shamed, knowing within her heart that last was best in her code of correspondence; and this not best because of Diana's own news, the reader nervously scanned the brief missive, lingeringly re-read it twice.

"After some disappointment about red bear, we are now well away from the beaten track and hope for real good luck. Would not gossips be horrified if they knew I and Ralph are camping quite near each other in a poplar forest, miles and miles remote from society? At nights we roast ourselves at roaring bonfires of logs that cost us nothing—the forest officers don't seem to care if they know. Ralph got a splendid bear in the dead of last night—the shikaree woke him up, and he brought it down as it was feeding in a mulberry-tree. Before that our bag was about equal. But news has come of a leopard that has carried off a calf from a village some miles off; so we are keen to wipe each other's eye with its skin. And to-night we intend to spend in a *machan* (you know! a tree-platform), over a tied-up old goat as decoy. By the time you get this, luck will have decided

which of us, if either, secures the leopard. Report says it is a snow one; a beauty. When does Peggy return to the *Pink Lotus?* Let me know, and I'll make Ralph go down, as he ought to see more of his future wife before his leave is up. Lots of kisses to my David, and love from your true friend,

"DI."

("*Make* Ralph come down to see his promised—wife! They have spent, let me see, how many days together? . . . On board ship did *not* count.") Roma's white fingers worked, for this was a simple rule-of-five calculation.

Oh, lovely! The flash of a golden oriole caught her eye, so close its black wings brushed through overhanging branches. Then followed more bird-sights. A brace of large kingfishers, mottled in splashes of black and white. But she watched in vain for a second glimpse of the rare scissor-tailed kingfisher, of paradise-bird beauty, that had once gladdened her eyes a fleeting moment.

What was this? Major Meredith's letter, unheeded, lay at her feet. Lifting it with quick compunction, his sister tore it open, apologising in spirit, and read with lightening of heart.

"DEAR OLD GIRL,

"I start to-morrow. Arrival depends on tonga ponies, landslides, rain, but not on the eagerness to reach the *Pink Lotus* Arms of

"Your ancient brother,

"PHIL."

So, soon a crowd would be around her; on the banks; in the willow grove. Her grove; her stream—till now.

Sweet solitude! gentle melancholy, farewell! Self must be tuned up to concert pitch. No more luxuriously sad musings, slackness of small daily observances as to

meal hours, unpunctuality and ever so many more petty indulgences of lonely livers.

Even as she so mused the boat grounded in upper shallows, and the old manji, accustomed to "lady-sahib's" ways, poled ashore beside a mud house half hidden in trees, where was a sloping bank. Out of habit, Roma got out for a stroll in the shade, turning along the brink of one among many streamlets that brawl down from the hills. This one was enchanting with rippled wavelets singing over beds of stones so rounded by friction through ages no edge was left that could injure or obstruct its neighbour.

"And yet they are each individual," mused Roma. "Certainly I shall be the better a being for getting back into the current of life, grinding with those around me, to and fro, stirred by the same force."

A clamber on higher ground for a glance at the mountains across the cotton-crop, with its pretty yellow flowers, crimson-edged; beyond this lay the maize and the rice; further, the Sind river where the valley narrowed. Then a sudden thought stopped the stroller's feet and she ejaculated alarmed—"If Phil comes this evening! What is for dinner?"

Back sped the shikara, borne down-stream by the swift current, besides urged by the men, now poling, now catching at overhanging branches to pull the craft quicker, in a way disgraceful to any true waterman. Round the last curve where the willow branches hid the houseboat's bulky ark outline to the last moment. There was David capering on the bank around unexpected familiar figures, whilst further loomed a huge rival craft, wholly disproportionate to the small winding stream. Two Hamlets in one scene.

"Doctor B'abble! Missus B'abble! They're come," shrieked David joyously, a wholly superfluous herald.

And, "Here we are!" "We've got the *juggur* next

you. Hope you weren't keeping it for Mrs. Drax," announced the Brabbles in equally unnecessary statement. Roma *had*—but what is more Christian than proper politeness? She welcomed them warmly to the desirable riverside mooring-place, and they proceeded to sit under the willows in deck-chairs already provided by Veraswami, and relate experiences.

"D'you know what our English slang term, 'Go to chokey' comes from?" began Brabble cheerily. "Why from *chokee*, of course; Hindu word for jail and brought back to old England by our tommies."

He stopped an instant to indulge David in a ram-fight, old head and golden pate butting each other.

Mrs. Brabble seized the unusual chance to put in her placid voice. "He thinks of that because we visited the Srinagar prison. There is a man in chains there because he killed a cow."

"By accident, of course. Only leg-irons, and the prisoners hold them up and trot along quite nimbly," interjected her husband, hastily taking up speech again. "D'you know the story? It was vouched for by no less a person than"—(he named a well-known foreign traveller in Kashmir)—"that in bygone years any Mohammedan who killed a cow was boiled in oil on the third bridge! And let me tell you another story. In the last century an American visiting this country for shooting saw some kites swooping round something on the ground and natives looking on. Two men by way of punishment for evading paying taxes had been buried up to their heads and their eyes were picked out." He stopped, genuinely sorry on seeing the significant glances of the womankind focussed on David's face of round-eyed curiosity.

Mrs. Brabble so far stepped aside from her long habit of wifely admiration as to murmur admonishingly: "*Pas* in front of *le* baby!"

In horrified penitence her spouse hastily snatched at this supposed French sentence to slap his knee, exclaiming, "That reminds me, Mrs. Wray. D'you know the story of the general in India who didn't know much Hindustani and addressed a native regiment after parade as, 'Rissaldars, jamadars and *soo'urs*,' meaning literally, officers, non-coms. and pigs! Meant to say sowars—ha, ha, ha! And the candidate up for exam. who was told to translate 'What are the wild waves saying,' so the chap thought a bit and burst out: 'Bobbery panee' (rough water), 'kya bolta?' (what are ye saying?). Oh, and still better, another fellow was ordered to turn 'God save the Queen' into the vernacular, so he was fairly flummoxed a minute, then he gave them: 'Oopur-wallah, burra memsahib kubbardar' (Top-fellow, big Lady, take care of!) Ho, ho, ho!"

"Oopur-wallah," piped David; "I'll say that when I say my——"

"When you see Uncle Phil—a new nice uncle. Not to anybody else," enjoined Roma, in a tone of distant thunder—foreseeing trouble at prayer-time. David's lower lip drooped. "I wish one of my mummies would come back," came in a sorrowful whimper.

Then he was caught up and squeezed tight against Roma's breast and was comforted presently as she carried him off on pretext to consult Veraswami about dinner. That personage, who emerged at call from a small wigwam on the bank, composed of some mats propped on sticks, rapidly solved the problem of providing "a man's dinner" when all the best meat was bought up at morning in the tiny butcher's booth near the bridge, and the boats from Srinagar only came down hither with provisions twice a week. "Dat cook chap no good. I make crokays and fricass; Madras curry and a saltsy dish. He cook fish and vegetable."

Roma thankfully understood that a pukka dinner

would appear with a savoury ; but pleaded : " The soup, Veraswami : he leaves grease on it. And his mutton is so tough."

" All right, mum. *I* clear soup. Mutton tender. Cook f*a*llow not know." Inquisitively the mistress pressed inquiries, but only wrung out by cross-examination the staccato words : " Rub oil—salt—pepper."

" But you don't get on with the khansamah ; and you'll never manage in *there*," eyeing the mat shelter whence smoke curling out betrayed the Hindu was cooking his rice apart from contamination.

" Can do." Wherewith the Indispensable politely touched his forehead, vanishing to hunker in his lair over a cooking-hole grubbed in the bank, containing a charcoal fire protected by a few stones.

An hour later Major Meredith arrived, and on seeing the familiar mummified visage, almost expressionless, yet its watchful dark eyes betraying scrutinising attention, the so long lonely woman was surprised at the warm rush of gladness flooding her heart. Here were affection, sympathy, thoughtful care. How had she subsisted without them these late days ? Her eyes were brilliant, her looks sought her brother's face yearningly during the meal they two shared, for the Brabbles considerately retired this evening from joint society.

" Rattling good cooking. Your chef is a clinker," Phil approved. " What ?—the bearer. He can't be much of a Hindu if he handles your food."

" Not a good heathen, perhaps ; yet a first-class Christian in practice," returned Roma. " But now tell me—have you seen anything of Ralph Bowman ? "

" You mean Bruce. He came down to Pindi for an examination in Pushtu, so I laid my snare warily and caught the bird for half an hour. At first he hated the sight of me ; it was pretty difficult to get salt on his tail. But in the end the poor lad grew less shy, though he's

wilder than ever after this unhappy experience. I'm rather afraid he may——" Major Meredith lifted his elbow, raising an imaginary glass. "Yes; he was hard hit. I wish to heavens that introduction under his nickname had not been my doing, and said so. 'You don't often slip up, Major,' he answered. 'Don't take it to heart. Fate put a finger in the pie.' Awfully forgiving, but he turned white. He's trying to get sent to some frontier fort where no ladies are allowed. Dreary-dismal-Khan would be too lively for him, he said: that's really Dehr Ismail Khan. He's thinking of exchanging to another regiment and that goes hard, though it might be for the best as he feels that he and Auldjo can never now be the close friends they were. Oh, you women! you women! That's how a man's life is ruined."

Roma flared up indignantly. "Oh, you men! How unjust you are. Why, Peggy offered to give up all for his sake. But in his insensate pride he refused to listen; set himself resolutely to roast at the stake."

"Hum. He has got it in his head that her heart is set on remaining mistress of Cowford; that the poor little fool did say she would try, but she would never be happy if she did chuck her home. It's a tangled skein, but let's hope she'll get on with Auldjo."

Gloomily Major Meredith lit a cigarette and lay back in his chair. Roma's delicate dark brows drew closer in like dark forebodings. Did she sincerely wish in her inmost heart that Peggy would make Ralph Auldjo happy; so happy that never the smallest surmise of what might otherwise have been would cross his mind? Oh, she ought to wish it, she must—she did. Out! out! mean, selfish, however small and hidden thoughts; surely they were not hers, but whispered suggestions from some hovering unholy presence.

"I love my Peggy," she firmly repeated to herself that night before passing from ken of this waking world.

"Yes, to *him*——" Then she shrank back as from hallowed ground.

A couple of days brother and sister passed happily together, making excursions to the pretty Manisbal Lake, and visiting Tulmula, that strange, small temple hidden on its islet among curiously winding waterways overhung by thick foliage. Major Meredith imparted his theory that these curving channels in earlier times were supposed by the primitive inhabitants to represent a symbol of the serpent-worship then prevalent in Kashmir. Roma added that but lately, on the Maharajah making one of his usual visits to the sacred spot, he had commanded all the farmers around to contribute *seers* of fresh milk to be poured as libation into the water; perhaps an unwitting survival of the milk-offerings well-known as a feature of this naga-worship. Only that Veraswami always kept a provision of tinned milk she would have shared at tea-time in the laments of the other houseboat visitors to Ganderbal.

Then Meredith joined a party of men friends riding up to Leh. "You'll stay with Dot and me on your way back, old girl," was his departing injunction.

It was pleasant to be called "old girl" again, to feel treated as a compeer in years, or, still more refreshing, actually as a junior to be cared for and counselled.

On Sunday morning, there being no church except at Srinagar, after her own devotions, Mrs. Wray bethought herself of impressing the day on David's small mind by responding to his incessant demand of, "Will you tell me a story?" with a lively account of the creation. This soon changed to a catechism in which the child became a merciless examiner. What were "*amunals*" made out of? What was David made out of? In despairing perplexity, after a fusillade of whats and whys, the teacher plunged to sea-depths, and thinking that a scientific basis must be best for the infant mind,

warily mentioned protoplasm. Then at the prospect of yet further interrogating searchings into origin, the deceiving woman feigned enthusiasm. "Talk about fishes, now. Lots and lots of fishes."

"Why did God make fishes wis no legs," persevered the small inquisitor.

But while the grown-up was engaged in thinking out a suitable answer, he solved the problem for himself. "I s'pose that's why they are in the sea. He frowed 'em there 'cos they wasn't no good."

It was the turn of the Brabble pair to be guests on the *Pink Lotus* for tiffin, David being also invited by way of a Sunday treat. His first wants of hunger appeased, his eye roved over the table, with a discrimination as to choice of offered sweets foredoomed perchance to disappointment. A chubby forefinger was suddenly pointed at a pink shape styled "blanky manji" by the butler.

"I know what dat is. Dat's jelly. It's the pudden God made me out of, and I just hate it!"

Explanations from the Sunday teacher were interrupted by the appearance of Veraswami, whose suave manner took on a slight shade of urgency, while his words shot out like peas from a ripe split pod.

"Chit, mum. Camp coolie bringed. He sented by Missis Drax. Colonel sahib ill. Done got hurted by leopard."

"*What?*" Roma's face turned grey, she felt a cold moisture on her forehead, and knew her friends must notice that her fingers trembled whilst fumbling with wrapping paper and the envelope within.

Mrs. Brabble's murmured, "Can I?" was rebuked by a marital mutter. "You look after the kiddie, old lady."

"I must go to the light. These windows are so shaded." Turning her back on discreet friendly sym-

pathy, Roma read, sick at heart; tried to speak—failed —cleared her voice with effort and read again, aloud this time, the pregnant words:

"DEAREST ROMA,

"Ralph's arm badly mauled by a leopard two hours ago. Three days' march before we can reach Ganderbal. We leave at sunrise. Have tents ready near the boats and wire for doctor and nurse to Srinagar——"

Before she had got so far, Brabble silently seated himself at the writing table, busied making out a list of necessaries to meet the case; then gave directions in a stage aside. ("Wife, pack my small black bag with everything—you know. I'll ride up the valley and meet them; maybe to-night. Oh, and my sleeping-bag.) Mrs. Wray, my boy is a doddering ass, will you lend me your 'Swami chap. I'll get a guide and a couple more ponies at Ganderbal."

Even whilst Roma was still stammering out words of gratitude there was seen a disappearing back view of a centaur nature, a bulky human body, seemingly adorned with a pony tail and legs. A white turbaned slender figure glided ahead, taking short cuts through the trees.

CHAPTER XXXI

ADOWN THE VALLEY

ADOWN the valley rode Peggy gaily, for the glory of the evening and the scenery of beauty were enough to lighten the heart of a cynic, and she was hastening to her dearest friend, Roma, so forged ahead of a long string of riders, camp coolies and led ponies.

Astride of a stout tat, women's saddles being almost unknown in Kashmir, her cheeks were blooming, her mind refreshed and strengthened after the solitudes and clean winds aloft between mountains and sky. By the bridge where the Sind, after receiving its tributary nullah stream, runs wide and strong she halted, taking farewell of her friends.

"What a good time we have had together. After all, life is a capital institution," she cheerily ended.

The others tailed down the riverside, passing the many huge houseboats awakened, since the sun declined, to all the varied life of the bund; tea-parties under the fringe of great trees, playing children, ayahs and bearers conscientiously idling, doomed fowl scratching their last, hobbled horses, everybody's terriers, Irish or broken-haired, besides envious lurking pi-dogs.

Crossing the bridge and taking the road by the smaller stream as a guide directed, Peggy joyously hailed

an approaching group. This bore a slight resemblance to a coat of arms, the centre-piece being a diminutive pony and rider, flanked by towering supporters dark-visaged, with white puggarees of the family washing-bundle shape on their heads.

"David! My darling, ducky David! Give your Auntie Peggy a kiss." Next minute a reluctant cavalier was being hugged by an ardent nymph. "How are you?"

"Welly ill. Leave go my arm; it's been hurted by a leopard."

"Little humbug! You are always prattling about panthers or leopards. How is Auntie Roma?"

"She's ill too. Everybody's ill 'cept Doctor Brabble and the nurses. All their arms may be tutted off, only not mine; it's weller. Everybody's doing it; doing it," chanted David, in the then popular ditty taught him by his indiscreet friend, Hopkins.

"What do you mean? Oh, I'd like to squeeze you hard, if that would get some sense out." The maid attempted another kiss, but her swain ducked, falling over into the ready arms of his adoring syce, to the bitter jealousy of his yet more devoted bearer, while he squealed:

"You've had one. That's all for to-day."

"But be a good boy and tell me are there any real nurses at the camp. Who are they?"

"Nursie Lyttle and—and—a big, big one. I fordet her name."

Was the child romancing? It was quite likely, yet—— In vain the Miss-sahib scrutinised the impassive dark faces of the men, who spoke no English, she remembered, excepting "Allright" and "Yessir;" and she (companioned always with her friends) was fast forgetting the little she had arduously learned of Hindustani, which chiefly concerned hot water or tea. She urged her steed forward,

whilst David, with most unflattering relief, shouted a lordly command to be conducted to the bazaar which his servitors zealously obeyed, though aware the memsahib disapproved unaccountably of its smells and society for their charge. But how argue with a Baba?

How lovely were the overarching giant trees, and the vivid green of the paddy-fields to left, while on the right showed the grand hills, their crests pine-fretted, their flanks veiled with violet mists. Though no artist with an eye born or trained to discern shades and hues unseen by less gifted mortals, Peggy's honest British heart loved country sights. In the back of her mind remained immovably the thought, "Give me home," but common fairness acknowledged that English skies produced few colour schemes to match against these of Kashmir.

Presently a line of snowy tents partially showed behind the trees, pitched in a sylvan glade of short-cropped grass, bordered by grey-green willows edging the hidden stream that was betrayed by houseboat roofs peering through breaks in the foliage. Not a soul was in sight; excepting some cook-boat infants playing near their floating matted home, while two women pounded rice with alternating thuds of the heavy staves, each lifted straight and high, then brought down as if crushing a foe. The dull, monotonous strokes intensified the surrounding stillness, and for some unknown reason made Peggy strangely uneasy. Her downright mind would have scorned to see in this an omen of Fate's crushing process with human lives; but some underlying suggestion, maybe, was aroused there by the blows. Dismounting, she went forward, hesitating whether to hail the silent tents and possibly unknown occupants, or to seek Roma on the houseboat.

A tall woman in white nursing costume and cap settled the question by emerging from the largest tent.

"Please, please, tell me why you are here?" asked Peggy, running to meet her. "Is anyone ill? Who is it? *Not* Mrs. Wray?"

The nurse eyed with cold, tired eyes the apparently inquisitive caller, replying in a markedly hushed tone: "Kindly speak lower. The patient is in there. He is a Colonel Auldjo."

"Colonel—Auldjo!!" The girl stood with dilated eyes and rose-red parted lips; hurried words followed tripping on each other's heels. "But he was quite well . . . What is the matter? Do tell me. I can't think——"

"His arm was injured by a leopard when out shooting. If you wish to leave cards or inquire, be good enough to call at one of the boats, as I am just off duty and must take my sleep."

"But—but, nurse, *please*, one word more yourself. Is there any danger of his losing it?" implored Peggy in a horror-struck whisper, as David's reference to "tutting off everybody's arms" rushed to the front.

Nurse Wright was one of those gaunt, hard-featured women whose hearts melt secretly under the warming influences of youth and that engaging prettiness never granted to themselves. She answered more kindly, though still deterrent. "We can say nothing but what the doctors tell us. They are going to have a final consultation whether it will be necessary to operate."

"How dr-r-eadful! Dear, good nurse, you must let me see him." A plump, small hand pressed a lean, muscular shoulder with coaxing softness. "You will understand, it's my duty to be at his bedside to help. I'm engaged to him."

"You! Why, you look quite a child." Suppressing the following equally frank remark that there seemed little promise of bedside aid in the petitioner's juvenile

figure (for really in a Norfolk jacket and short khaki riding-skirt with putties, Peggy seemed a mere schoolgirl), the nurse gave way before those dewy eyes, that quivering full underlip. "Well then, promise not to be silly and make a fuss. Mrs. Wray is watching him now. This way—go in there. It is you he is always calling for, I suppose."

Tremulous at this, besides beset by urging inner questionings as to what she felt and how she ought to be feeling, Peggy stole within the shaded tent. The sufferer was tossing uneasily and rolling his iron-grey head on his pillow, though his eyes were almost closed as in semi-unconsciousness. Close to the camp-bed with her back turned, Roma crouched rather than sat, in an attitude of intense watchfulness, her fingers hovering ever so gently, like a mother-bird over its young, till with imperceptible touches they restored order and doubtless comfort to the sick man, for he quieted and murmured like a child—"*Roma!*"

But two or three seconds later, as two women listened, hushed, he called out as from a deep pit of misery: "Roma! Roma! Where are you? Come to me. Come. My beloved! my queen——"

"Hush, hush. I am here. I will not leave you." Bending and believing herself alone with one who knew not what she did, Roma laid her lips on the sufferer's forehead, spiritual anguish in the stillness of her bowed head. Perchance earthlier feelings clamoured then, for she moved and put her cheek against his. He lay still as a sleeping infant.

A slight sound. With a quiver, Roma started aside, turned her head and saw Peggy standing there. A crimson tide overflowed the unhappy elder woman's whole face; it receded and left her turning as deadly white. Proud, self-possessed as she was by nature, pure in intention, she quailed before that innocent,

youthfully merciless figure, that stood in awful uprightness like an accusing angel.

This was the tragic moment of a well-nigh lifelong friendship, Peggy told herself ; she must rise to it.

" How long has this been going on ? " came in a whisper intended to be fraught with terrible intensity, but that sounded about as appalling as the hiss of a blue-tit when her nest is pried by poking child-fingers.

" Nothing has been going on," the accused recovered herself to assert with sad dignity, rising and humbly advancing two pleading hands, unheeded. " You *know* we two—he and I—never met after your engagement until he returned, the evening of yesterday. And only for a short time this morning, besides now they have allowed me to take watch when he is wandering in his mind like this. . . . Don't, don't, don't think this means —anything ! He is delirious. He does not know—he cannot mean anything he says—Oh, he is waking."

Auldjo's eyes slowly unclosed with a bewildered look. Firm resolve on her soft features, his betrothed moved towards him.

" I am back—my de—poor Ralph. Your Peggy. Don't you know me ? "

" Little Peggy," came from the sufferer, in a tone of arrested attention. Next, politely : " I hope you had a pleasant time," as if dimly aware that some added expression of interest was called for.

Peggy choked. Then getting mastery over her just indignation, she bent nearer, meaning to lay in turn a kiss on her fiancé's brow with valiant daring, but perceiving it was damp—while she had, as usual, lost her handkerchief out of her sleeve—drew back, revolted. Nevertheless, not to be outdone by Roma, she also applied her apple-blossom cheek to his unshaven face ; then shivered with repugnance at the rough bristles.

Auldjo took no notice of the action. His mind was

wandering again into a wilderness of solitariness and dimly surrounding shapes of trouble. Again he called, as on a guardian saint, "*Roma!*"

Once more the eyes of the two women met. And now Roma's gleamed with that mysterious sense of motherhood that so often is the spring of woman's love for infirm, aged or even unworthy men at which the world scoffs or marvels. Ralph Auldjo, when strong and hale, she had given up to this girl of free-will; but Ralph ill and crying on her for help——! He was her big child, now. The weakest created thing will defy the world in defence of its helpless youngling.

"This is very strange," uttered Peggy, still low but severely.

A sniff startled both. Sister Lyttle stood by the curtain-flap. Her looks passed from one to the other with a grave sympathy that showed she had heard. A professional air quickly succeeded.

"Now, ladies, I will ask you to leave the patient to me. Just wait one minute, Mrs. Wray, to give me the last temperature. Miss Lee, I am glad to see you again. Seeing you ride up, I hurried over to stop you from coming in here, fearing you would not understand matters. The patient is quite sensible at times, most clear in the mornings; and next time he is so, I will tell him you are here and bring you in."

Stunned by what she had seen and heard in the last few minutes, Peggy found herself outside and, so to speak, pounced on by the ever-friendly Brabble, waiting to administer balm. But while he meant his pithy sentences to be injected into the hearer's mind, in a manner, the latter's mood made no more of them than as a dressing, a smear of soothing, uncomprehended application.

Thus when Mrs. Drax next hailed the arrived-one from her poop and began:

"Sit down; you look pale, you poor little girl. But

Doctor Brabble has been telling you about the symptoms, and how we must just hope for the best," Peggy replied, with a sad head-shake :

" Yes. He said he had got some new stuff from Srinagar, and the moment it came he gashed the wound, to put this in. Grisly ! "

" The new preventive serum. When injected it decreases (generally) the blood-poisoning. You don't seem to realise what a boon this is."

" Oh, but he told me—a lot of dreadful things. That there are always horrid bacteria in a wound, and they increase by—goodness me ! I forgot how many millions a minute, or second, and unless they are stopped—something with a long name happens." . . .

" A short name, dear—Death." Diana firmly held that beating a bush in this instance was misplaced kindness.

As expected, Peggy burst out crying, and felt the better for giving vent to her emotion. Afterwards she begged for an account of the accident from the one person who knew it at first-hand. For perhaps the tenth time Mrs. Drax complied, but she grew briefer with each recital.

" Well, it was the second night we had tried for a leopard that the village people near told us of. We were up a tree in a machan with an old goat tied below as decoy, and it was a dark night, at first. After four hours the leopard came. By that time, there was a young moon risen ; not very good light ; but Ralph—who won the toss for first shot this time—fired and hit the brute. A second shot seemed to break its back, for it kept still. After a wait the shikaree began to throw stones in the direction of the leopard that lay in the shadow. Not a move. So the shikaree got down cautiously and came towards our tree. Ralph got down too. But he stopped me as I wanted to follow and begged—really ordered me—to stay, which at the moment offended me. Ralph went foremost. There came a growl and a horrible scuffle !

The leopard sprang on him and pinned his right arm, so that he could not use his gun. What he did do was to try and throttle the beast with his left hand, so they were hard at it, swaying to and fro. The shikaree was close by, but he did not dare fire in the scrimmage for fear of hitting his master: though I could hear Ralph shouting to him to shoot.

"As to me—at the noise of the tussle I sprang up and —why or how it happened no one can ever tell—but the machan gave way, and down I came in a heap on the ground. The old goat was prodding at me, so I rolled over, finding my gun close to my hand and next moment somehow, was in the midst of the scrum. Ralph called, 'Chance it! If you don't, he's killing me, and I'd rather be shot.' So I let fly; and at the same instant so did the shikaree—providentially one of the other men had caught up the lantern, so we could see a bit. The leopard fell back at that, dead."

"Then you saved his—Ralph's—life!" awestruck at such prowess, and in a woman. What a raw, useless fool was she herself, the hearer!

"No such luck. It was the shikaree's bullet that did it. Mine would only have prolonged the business" (curtly). "In fact, my share in the whole affair was ridiculous—tumbling out of the tree—and you may well laugh at me."

Not that Peggy manifested the least disposition to do anything of the kind; however Diana made the suggestion good-naturedly, by way of cheering her up. She added, "Now we've got to nurse him out of the wood. That will be the real saving."

"Oh, are you helping? I am glad; I don't mind *you* nursing." It was an unfortunate remark, as the speaker admitted by a flush, instantly aware that Mrs. Drax's eyes searched her face. That it was understood became evident by the dry if kindly grave reply:

"Don't mind anything whilst Ralph Auldjo is in the dark valley. If he recovers—which, please God, he may—then you can think over things and see if you really mind—or simply were mistaken. Now! I must see David take his supper. And you will be glad to unpack in your boat and get changed. We dine all together here to-night."

Again a drooping Peggy left. Unpack—but where? Oh, she must send after her friends and entreat the continued loan of the small tent at the twilight and dimensions of which she had jeered and grumbled alternately, declaring she could only see to dress her hair by the eye of faith and felt like a wasp under an inverted wineglass. For Roma and she to meet in the unavoidably close neighbourhood of the same houseboat!—the situation would be mutually too distasteful.

"Dearie! You are never passing *me* by!" cooed Mrs. Brabble's well-fed pigeon tones. "Bless her! Let me just give you a good hug. And another. The poor child! There—do you feel better?"

"Lots!" breathed Peggy, with whole-hearted emotion. "You—you've done me real good. Tell me. Do you think it would be improper for me to use *his*—the colonel's—boat till he wants it? You see, it's—so—so awkward taking back my cabin where Pollyann has been sleeping. She's so useful to Mrs. Wray—and the sofa is abominably hard for her or me."

"Hum. There are the native servants—they may be scandalised; and—and—something was said about that boat being wanted for, I'm not sure whom. Maybe the Srinagar doctor, or a—a—friend," faltered Mrs. Brabble weakly; trusting that through someone else it might dawn on her young friend for what purpose the *Sharp Ship* was requisitioned. Then, in a rush of vicarious generosity:

"You shall have my hubby's room. The very thing.

He will be more than glad to give it up and dress in my—our—bathroom."

More than glad. This must have prophesied a sentiment that o'erleapt itself and came to grief, to judge by the sadness that sicklied the benefactor's countenance when he stepped on board. By that time Peg, after fervent, "No, No's" mingled with blessings, was splashing in an evening tub, and the doctor's most intimate belongings were inextricably mingled with those of his spouse.

Conversation at dinner naturally languished, despite heroic efforts on the doctor's part, backed by Mrs. Drax. Diana told over once more—Peggy alone had not yet heard these—the details of all that took place after the leopard was killed. How cool and collected Auldjo had been in applying at once the remedies always carried by way of precaution on a shoot. How they got back to their respective camps, not far apart, in the small chill hours, then started on the return march as the dawn showed. This took three days hard riding, and how plucky Ralph proved himself, especially during the last march, when his wound began to be painful, simply surpassed Diana's previous experience and powers of belief. No (this in answer to Ralph's affianced bride), he did not suffer much—not to speak of—till then. Here Brabble broke in, with professional reminiscences:

"He need not. Why, there was Sir Robert What's-his-name, *you* remember," invoking his consort's memory, "who told me he never felt anything when a tiger was chewing his arm. Not a thing. In my belief, once the fear of being caught is over, animals don't suffer when they are being devoured by other beasts."

A discussion of this theory was sedulously protracted through the rest of the dreary meal. All avoided the one subject uppermost in their minds. As to the two principally concerned, Roma was pallid, almost utterly silent

and incapable of eating. On the other hand, Peggy, fresh from a long march, with provisions run short this last day, felt ravenous; ashamed of which unfeeling symptom, she refused half the dishes and was pitied and coaxed by her hosts to inner confusion.

Not a syllable was exchanged as to Peg's change of lodging. But the intelligence conveyed by Pollyann, with grateful appreciation that her own old bones would continue to "lay on a pair of them miserable razais stuffed with cotton flock, which was better nor none on the cane sofy seat," gave the mistress acute misery.

To have so longed for the return of the being dearest to her on earth since some years; her charge, little sister, pet. And now to be shunned; to seem a traitress whilst Heaven—only Heaven!—knew how innocent she was, with what agony of renunciation she had abandoned all hope, chance, yes, and possibility of winning Ralph's love. But he had loved her; he did now; and he might be dying!

And never, never would Peggy, honest, downright Peggy, forgive her.

It was a relief to these two when came a message that Nurse Lyttle was having supper and would Miss Lee come and see her in the middle tent. Upon which Diana murmured in Roma's ear insistently, and shadow-like the poor woman glided away.

"To watch him," said Peggy to herself, with a kind of scornful nobility of soul, at least so it seemed to herself, surprised at the calm with which she took this. Her own departure was delayed by flimsy pretexts, Diana and Mrs. Brabble vying in requests to stay just one minute to take Nurse a box of chocolates, a lively book. Peggy escaped, however, in time to see a drooping dark form, standing at Auldjo's tent-door, both hands pressed to her face; then, as if rousing from prayer, pass within.

"Poor thing!" said the watcher involuntarily. That she should live to call her benefactress, her adored guide and best friend "poor thing!" It was amazing!

"My pretty dear! . . . What beastly luck for you! How are you taking it?" Nurse Lyttle sprang up for an exchange of cheek kisses, plunging into the subject on hand with invigorating directness.

"As nicely as might be expected," was the candid answer. "Oh, it is a relief to have another girl to talk to. The rest are all such *old* dears. They can't help it, only they look on things differently. But I say!—do you understand it? I'm in a fog. When did it begin between them? And why, why, in the name of common sense did the man not refuse politely when this child proposed to him; for that is what it came to. You know I told you. Catch me ever propose to any man again!"

In spite of the circumstances, faint sounds of mirth were stifled by both. Nurse Lyttle was very much a girl, if a few years the elder of the two.

"Never mind about beginnings; very likely it began on board ship the first time he shook up her cushions, when she was ill. It was *on* when I came to nurse you both after that ducking; why, to me it was pitiful—for the colonel looked as if someone had put a bullet through him after that interview they had before your engagement. And she, dear soul! fairly broke down after refusing him (as of course she did; that was plain as my nose). All along I supposed she was sacrificing herself to get you back your old home and a second—a—a good husband."

The speaker reddened at the slip of her tongue. The Blush-rose became a crimson rambler.

"What a—selfish—blind—horrid little wretch I must have seemed! To think I would willingly deprive her and his last remaining good years of sunshine to keep any home, even the Garden of Eden! . . . Well! it is not

too late. If only you and the doctors pull him through, our middle-aged lovers may be blissful yet."

"You give him up? Righto!"

"Would *you* haul an unwilling ram by his horns to the altar?" asked Miss Lee bluntly.

"Never had the chance," replied Nurse Lyttle bitterly. "My one and only love loved and just rode away."

Peggy looked unutterable fellow-feeling; dumb-struck at this revelation. "I am sorry. . . . The same here. . . . The other, first one, Bruce Bowman, went off in a passion thinking I didn't really care enough, when, if he had asked me to be chained to his saddle and run after him for life, I'd have done it."

In turn this avowal awed the other hearer by its forcefulness.

Both girls leaned forward, their hands supporting their chins, and with a long mutual look of self and fellow pity, heaved a simultaneous sigh.

"Hey, hey! Not finished supper yet, nurse. What's wrong? Come, these lugubrious looks disappoint me in you. An emotional nurse—fie! fie!"

"As Miss Lee is a friend of mine, doctor, I certainly was mentioning some details of my home-life before taking to nursing; but I hope I know how to disassociate my private affairs from any case I undertake," said Nurse Lyttle stiffly, standing to attention in professional manner.

"Hum, hey! But she has enough to depress her already, though we'll hope for the best. You make it worse for her, if she has to share your woes as well." Brabble was worried secretly, and inclined to be snappish.

"You are quite wrong," burst in Peggy. "There is nothing that consoles one half so much as knowing somebody else is as wretched as yourself, or more so."

"What? Hey, hum. Well I'm—" ("flabbergasted"

was the correct word changed to). "I'm come for a few words with the nurse when I hear her report; so, Miss Peggy——"

"Good-night."

For the final time that evening the speaker found herself banished. Bed was her best, her only refuge.

CHAPTER XXXII

A CRISIS

NEXT morning saw Peggy standing, fresh as a rose, under the light shade of the willow grove dappled with sun-patches.

She was but newly risen, refreshed by a prolonged sleep of which she felt ashamed, unsuspecting that by Brabble's orders a sleeping-draught was slyly mixed in the glass of warm milk that Mrs. Brabble brought to her bedside, "the last thing."

Now she looked round with much of a child's feelings when finding itself alone in a strange garden. All seemed green peace; a golden oriole fluted somewhere near; a pair of hoopoes kept busily digging their sharp bills into the sod in hopes of spearing worms. Snow-swollen and grey the stream slid round yonder wooded corner, its coolness perceptible in the air that was hot in the open sun-warmed glade. Songbird, the soothing river sough, the peeps of paddy-fields whence came a droning chanty of toilers, all blended to inspire confidence in what the day might bring. Yet the child which had not altogether left the girl felt fearful as of lurking monsters, new dangers; knowing well one terror—that of illness, or worse—lay so near. She would so joyously have admired, but was afraid.

On the solitary road behind came a galloping tonga;

the ponies foam-streaked. The girlish figure neither saw nor heard, for the road was deeply dusty or partly grass-grown. She had thrown her topee on the sward, and her bright hair made a glory round her face, with its purely white and warmly rose complexion. A blush-rose indeed, an English rose of sweetest old-fashioned growth, she looked. Ah! but with a canker i' the bud. The second thought sped like a pursuing wolf at its fore-runner's heels through the mind of a man who had flung himself out of the suddenly arrested tonga, then strode across the grass. His eyes, red-rimmed from motoring all night, sharing spells with an outwearied chauffeur, first sought the tents anxiously. Peggy's were feasting their gaze on mountain-tops. So he came unawares upon her among the willows.

One look. Starting aside, he made to pass by, when a twig broke under his foot. Startled, Peggy stared. Bruce glared.

Blushing, the girl stole out a timid hand.

The man's mouth hardened its clean-cut, pleasant curves. He bowed; that is, he lifted the crown of his deerstalker hat an inch.

At that Peggy's face took on a changed aspect. The rose vision vanished; her eyes lost light; her under lip quivered. Longing to speak, she could not frame a syllable.

A harsh query came: "How is he?"

"He's in there; and the doctors are consulting whether an operation is necessary. I am waiting to hear."

"Of course. It concerns you. He wrote me of his engagement. My congratulations! Apparently you did not think it worth while to inform him that I had had the previous honour of—being more than a passing acquaintance." The words stung from their cruel politeness, as they were meant to do.

"I—I—meant to tell—but—but there was no time."

"Kept it as a pleasant little surprise up your sleeve.

I remember you are a mysterious young woman; fond of small secrets."

Unhappy Peggy looked piteously up in the stern, handsome young face and angry eyes above her; adoring them in heart. A weakness seized her, longing to drop on her knees before this presentment of youthful Mars, dusty, travel-grimed, but heroic in her eyes.

Feebly she overcame the traitorous inclinations within her fortress; tremulously besought:

"Don't—please. Perhaps it will not happen. It may all turn out to—to—have been a mistake."

Bowman turned dark red, in uncontrollable wrath. "What? When you secured the right man and Cowford at last! Wait . . . I see! If he loses his arm and the regiment, the bargain is off, that's it. You offered to go shares with a whole husband, not a mere fraction of one. So you can keep your place and fortune, while your sensitive conscience will be clear."

It was too much. The worm turned. Peggy's eyes shot green fire; teardrops glistened under the lids; crimson banners flew.

"For shame! That is unmanly—unworthy of you. You never even heard me out—not that I ought to explain, or you to know what is your cousin's affair. Poor man! He respects me and I trust him."

Silence followed for a few moments. A stillness in which the willow trees seemed to be listening and waiting.

"Perhaps it was rather too brutal of me," came in heavy answer. "Accept my apology. I must go to him."

Turning, Bruce was some feet away before Peggy's collapsed courage succeeded in sending out a low cry, "One moment! Come back. . . . I want——"

But if her former lover heard, which was doubtful, he never turned nor heeded. The girl stood clasping and unclasping her hands. After all, what had she meant

to say? Oh, not that which her heart yearned to cry out. . . . No, no! that she would never have dared. She was still affianced to his cousin. All was over between her and—— Ah! here came Doctor Brabble.

There was concern on the generally jolly features of the well-known surgeon; fatherly kindness in his grave voice.

"No use in mincing matters, my dear. We have decided on the operation taking place, as soon as possible. Cheer up! Lots of fellows get on all right with one empty sleeve. We will fix him up nicely with a wooden arm and a spike."

"A——!" The horrible vision rose before Peggy's ignorant mind of a household lord sitting at the head of the dinner-table spearing his roast beef on a spike.

"Yes. Now he has asked for half an hour to settle up private matters. However, there is not any sufficient reason to doubt that all may go well, and the blood poisoning be arrested. He wants to see you and one or two others in ten minutes, when the nurses get him ready."

"How did Captain Bowman hear, and get here in time?" muttered Peggy. "Did you know?"

"Eh? Of course. We all knew." The doctor was making for his boat and thinking out preparations at double-quick pace, so the feather-headed irrelevancy of these questions put some impatience into his tone. "Your colonel had his senses about him until he got to camp, and afterwards, poor chap. He wired himself, when he reached Ganderbal. His friend started at once; has been travelling day and night."

He broke off, remembering at that moment why this girl seemed flustered at Bowman's arrival. Deuced awkward, he had told his wife only yesterday; and none of the women had said a word of warning.

"Never mind about that now. They are bosom pals, besides being cousins, so it is perfectly natural there should

be family affairs to speak of. Now, my dear, be brave and go to see him, as is your duty."

With sinking heart back turned Peggy, bidding herself be true, honest, and kind to poor, poor Ralph; for to pretend to be more loving than she felt would wrong him. How she pitied him—pitied Roma—surely she might add just a little pity for herself.

As she reached the tent, there were Roma, Mrs. Drax and Sister Lyttle standing on the shady side. The nurse was speaking in haste. "Yes; he will see you both afterwards, he says. Ah! here she is. We are waiting for you, Miss Lee."

Ralph was sitting up in his bed, tidied, almost spruce, and perfectly clear-headed. Beside him stood Bowman, looking haggard, and the more ill of the two, certainly the more anxious.

"All right, old man. That settles regimental matters. Here comes our little cousin, Peggy. . . . There! Thank you, my child," said the sufferer weakly, smiling on the awestruck visitor as stammering words of sympathy were forced by her will over the portals of speech; while more ran back like frightened babes. To meet—to speak under Bruce's heavy gaze; this ordeal was far, far worse than she had expected! In a cheering voice the sick man went on:

"We will not waste time on what can't be cured, although I am truly grateful for your and everyone's kindness. Now; attend to me. Your future is now the chief consideration. I cannot go back on the opinion I honestly gave when you asked it, namely, that Cowford always has gone and I think should go in the male line; the old tenure being that the owner should be able to provide and lead twenty archers or men-at-arms when called upon. This you accepted. Well, in case I don't pull through—Cóme on this side, nearer. Bruce, dear chap, you on the other. Then Ralph Bruce Bowman

here, your other cousin, will be the next owner by my wish and by my last will and testament, unless you dispute it."

"Don't talk rot. You're *not* going out!" burst from Bruce in desperate remonstrance, unheeded by the other twain.

"I will not dispute it," breathed Peggy solemnly.

"Good. You will be comfortable in the Dower Cottage, I trust, and happy. You are a dear, good girl and deserve to be happy."

A brief pause ensued. Auldjo seemed weak; recovering some force, he resumed: "At times you will be in need of a man's help if I am not there. So I want you two to be friends. Bruce, for my sake, will you take care of Peggy as if she were a sister? Peggy, I ask you to look to Bruce as to a brother."

A sound between a growl and a groan came from Bruce.

Peggy spoke up clearly, "I will try."

"That's right. Now I will not keep you both. Old chap, wait near hand, will you. You will stay by me afterwards?"

The two friends grasped hands—Auldjo's left hand—in a close grip.

But Peggy, half turning, stayed, grew scarlet—then blurted out:

"One moment. . . . May I say just one thing to you alone."

("*Don't* upset him now.")

"Certainly. I beg your pardon for not asking you to remain. What can I do for you?"

The two sentences were simultaneous. Bruce's aside was flung at Peggy as he was leaving. Auldjo's reply was promptly courteous; but a flush of apprehension mounted in his pale face. Eager to free herself from the suspicion of being likely to agitate the sufferer by

a scene, Peggy stood still, with the direct open gaze of a child and its simplicity.

"It's just this, Cousin Ralph. I really am awfully fond of you, but somebody else is much fonder. I mean poor Auntie Roma; and she is simply broken-hearted about your accident. Do, do, please say something to give her hope; that you will get well for her sake; and then that you'll be happy both together afterwards. For really I know you do care—you called her when you were rambling, and she and I both heard you. Don't mind about me, for I don't mind one bit and—and I'll be bridesmaid. It was all the fault of my uncle's preposterous letter."

"Peggy! Is this possible? She does not—she cannot——" Auldjo's eyes were alight now; he trembled with joy, yet was fearful.

"She does; she does. And oh, it will make me so happy, too. To see you both happy will be just lovely." Peggy's tears were raining down to her dismay, but she was smiling so valiantly, clasping her hands so entreatingly, that after a momentary hesitation Auldjo smiled back. "That's right. May I tell her to come?"

"You may. Come and give me a kiss first—little sister."

In her eagerness to be gone, Peggy bestowed an awkwardly hasty peck on the scarred cheek at which she had girded on board ship. To her virginal modesty it seemed filching something which belonged to Roma, however trifling.

Then she found herself outside with both arms round her best beloved friend, urging between gasps and hugs: "Go to him! He wants you—you—you! And if you don't tell him you will be Mrs. Auldjo, arm or no arm, I'll never love you any more. *There!*"

CHAPTER XXXIII

"SING, O THE GREEN WILLOW"

STORM clouds hung in threatening grey-white piles upon the rampart of mountains encircling the Sind valley. Aloft still higher, on the hidden giant peaks, on the flower-grown margs or meads, rain doubtless was falling in snow or blinding sheets. Down here by the nullah the weather was merely an unusual grey day stirred by an uneasy breeze that in gusts tossed the willow plumes, till these hung untidily ruffled, their silver-grey linings turned outwards.

Peggy Lee's mood matched the unwonted depression of the surrounding scene, so unfamiliar in sunlessness. Not dowered with a singing voice sufficient to express her heart's lament or trill its joy, she often found relief since childhood in poring over simple old ballads that have given like pleasure to simple souls for centuries.

To-day "Willow, Willow, Willow," rose to her mind, although instead of,

"A poor soul sat sighing under a sycamore tree," she, in her houseboat cabin, sat perched by turns on a creaking cot or a folding chair prone to fulfil its pliable duty at unexpected moments. How appropriate seemed the plaintive lapping of the passing stream against boat-chains, while curious sucking sounds beneath the keel, unheard generally save in the night hours, became mur-

murously audible. Yes, by changing the sex of the mourner one verse especially applied, in willow grove and snow-chilled stream, in love's salt sorrow, to the piteous state of one poor maid disdained, forsaken, rejected of all lovers, Margaret Lee.

"The cold stream ran by *her*, *her* eyes wept apace:
O willow, willow, willow!
The salt tears ran from *her* which drowned *her* face:
O willow, willow, willow!
O willow, willow, willow!
Sing, O the green willow shall be my garland."

Nevertheless it was a camp of thankfulness. These past days Auldjo held his ground like one whose whole will was set to live; steadily strengthened. With the rest Peggy rejoiced in still gratitude. But—so improved was the sick man that to-morrow his closest friend and newly-made adjutant was going back to see after "the" regiment. Nurse Wright had already left.

Leaving—to-morrow. By now Bruce must know, for all others in their party knew that Auldjo and Mrs. Wray were engaged. Each one but himself, pressing Peggy's hand, intimated as much by an embarrassed smile and brief remark of sympathy such as: "You did quite right": or "All for the best." Mrs. Brabble quite cheerily added, "Now the world is open before you."

Only neither word nor glance passed between Bruce and Peggy since they two stood by Auldjo's sick-bed. He kept apart, devoted in vigil by night and companionship by day to his more than brother. His meals were snatches served on a tray. Doctor Brabble alone or the nurses heard speech of him, and that merely the ever lasting sick-room refrain, "How is your patient getting on? What is the latest temperature?"

Going to-morrow!

Alone in her borrowed privacy, Peggy now gripped her

hands and gritted her small square teeth, thinking, thinking, thinking !

Only now she acknowledged to herself what mushroom hopes had sprung white in her mind these two past nights, ruthlessly trampled by the following days' events. Alas ! alas ! in her late lover's relentless eyes her conduct showed as prudent rather than magnanimous. Cowford Dower Cottage and a comfortable income were still hers. To his stubborn pride, despite his newly-acquired adjutant's pay her halved possessions still made an unsurmountable barrier.

Past a muslin blind cunningly fastened to a basket of geraniums swinging outside the window Peggy cautiously peered. The *Sharp Ship* lay moored next, beyond a shikara, and with one eye she could keep unobserved watch upon Bruce's movements whilst he was in the small fore cabin.

By good luck, yes ! he was seated outside ; his "sleeve" chair and long limbs filling the tiny deck.

A sudden resolve flared Peggy's cheeks to scarlet poppies. Her eyes took on a do-and-dare glitter. On tiptoe, suppressing her breath unconsciously, she extracted a closed letter from her locked dressing-case, looked at the superscription written in frenzy by her own trembling fingers—was it weeks or weary ages ago ?—to Captain R. B. Bowman.

With lips bitten to bleeding, his disowned sweetheart took up the passionate, despised cry of her heart, returned by him she loved unopened along with her photograph, that pretty portrait he had pressed to his lips when she gave it—hesitated. Then nerving herself to the deed whatever might come of it, she dropped the letter cautiously in the river's grey swiftness as Bruce bent forward, staring, staring at the swift, continuous flow of the current.

There ! it was twirling . . . it righted itself. She could

see the stamp and address uppermost. Quickly it floated towards him. Now—now!

Peggy suppressed a cry in her throat. If Bruce should miss seeing.

He saw—rose, bending forward—knit his brows. . . .

Ah! the strong voice rang out. "*Qui hai!*" An answering "Huzoor" came from the bund. A boatman waded into the stream, tucking up his baggy linen breeches as he splashed forward, till his dusky hand grasped the drifting letter—A pause. Downstream there followed a broken pink lotus, like a gigantic rosy tulip with a golden heart, a prize that no Kashmiri would let slip. Then knee-deep the wader slowly advanced, holding by the side of the *Sharp Ship*, till he gave up both letter and lotus to the commanding figure waiting upright.

Bruce bent his head; his back was turned. Slowly he turned into the *Sharp Ship's* cabin.

A little later the Miss-sahib in apparent aimlessness appeared strolling along the river's edge, wearing her prettiest blue *caubeen* (for squash caps were that year's fashion), also her most becoming white morning frock. The shady bund was fairly solitary here, yet not so remote but that she might easily be descried by any determined searcher.

An air of aimlessness, however, is hard to keep up. Good-luck! There curled faint smoke from halfway up a monarch of the woods, a plane tree which, like so many patriarchs of its kind, was hollow as a cavern, partly by nature, but more because generations of riverside wayfarers had lit fires within its centre, perhaps chopped out the chimney in its fork.

Recognizing Veraswami's grey flannels in this his favourite kitchen, his young mistress went to speak to him, then recoiled in some alarm. Her foot had almost trodden on a pi-dog cunningly curled in a hollow it had found and scratched out.

Gr-r-r! Up rose a matronly mongrel, showing its fangs, and the new-comer stood still, remembering that rabies is a constant danger in Kashmir.

Veraswami came to the rescue, chiding the pi, but throwing her a bone.

"Very sharp dog, mum. He come one day and beg, now keeps other pis all off. Him got puppies away in village, poor fallow, and when they cry he run back quick."

True enough, the mother was even now slinking off with her booty, making a détour to avoid the Drax pack of dogs.

Peggy watched the poor beast's eagerness with something like envy.

"It is wanted by its young ones. To be *wanted* by others or by someone—that, I believe, is what makes us happiest; women, as well as female dogs."

From the tents Sister Lyttle's trim figure came tripping; she waved in greeting. "I'm just off duty. My patient's going on well. O-o-h! How refreshing this cool air is." She breathed long and spread out her arms. "My breakfast will be ready and sleep ought to follow, instead of taking a ten-minutes' holiday. But there! What is the good of temptation, I say, unless you yield to it?"

As the friends linked arms, as was their wont, the little nurse added: "Have you heard I also am wanted back at hospital? Two bad enteric cases, and one of dysentery. The matron writes she can't spare me longer. Well! it's consoling to know that one is needed, although I would gladly stay on with you all till my patient is convalescent."

"You going! How I shall miss you," mourned Peggy. "But—who is this coming through the trees?"

A white sun-helmet was visible; an infantile screech of glee seemed its accompaniment. Half a minute later David's shrill call showed he was acting as guide. "Auntie Peg. Here's my Hoppy. My own dear man."

Both came from behind a thicket, close upon the two girls. Hopkins, fresh from a shooting expedition after snow leopards, showed a fried-potato nose and man-in-the-moon grin, as he gave Peggy his well-known, redoubtable grip.

"Awful this about Colonel Auldjo. But jolly good that he's over the worst of it so——"

The speaker's eyes lit on Nurse Lyttle; under his tanning he changed colour. If ever astonishment was written more clearly on human countenance, then its letters must needs have been branded by a red-hot iron. Slowly speech followed.

"Lady Louisa! . . . Little Lady Loo!"

"Sister Lyttle now, if—you—please."

The nurse's eyes were oddly bright, her precise enunciation defiant.

"You *here!*" went on the man, still so overwhelmed he spoke low, as if awe-struck. "And got up as a nurse. Not but what it's awfully fetching"—this last as if unaware he was speaking aloud.

The Sister's arm was still hooked in that of her companion, so that Peggy was aware it gave a convulsive jerk on Hopkins' first appearance and that now a palpitation of its owner's whole being sent waves along its surface.

"I am a hospital nurse. Colonel Auldjo is under my care. It is nearly two years since I came to Srinagar Cottage Hospital."

"Great Scott! And I've been three years in India with the regiment. Did you know?"

"Know? What should that matter to me? Perhaps."

"Then why did you never answer my letter after we were ordered so suddenly from Ireland? You ought to have done so; it deserved a reply from you yourself. Not that dab in the eye from his lordship, as if he were sending a dog to heel, loftily requesting me to spare pen

and paper in future missives—*that* was the expression—to any member of his family."

Hot as a furnace blast, deep as the rumble of a heavy wagon, burst out the natural man:

"A letter! I got none. From you—Why, for months and months I waited . . ."

By this time Peggy was dragging a reluctant small boy back towards the boats and heard no more. "Come on, David; we are not wanted."

David whimpered: "I'll go to my mummy. She always wants me."

His small hand wriggled out of his companion's clasp, and, feeling ill-treated, he sought Mrs. Drax.

Peggy remained in the willow wood alone.

CHAPTER XXXIV

NEW MOORINGS

NEXT noon shone hotly on a deserted glade.

Gone was the whole fleet of ark houseboats from willow-bank and the now lowered stream. A kingfisher, wont to consider the *Pink Lotus* mooring-rope his particular perch, moodily roosted on a branch, not nearly so advantageous whence to take a dive after a fish. Only a litter of reed-strips, discarded in mat-weaving, some rings of charcoal-burned stones marked where the cook-boats so lately made accustomed mess. Unchecked, a herd of chocolate-coloured cows grazed; hobbled ponies limped through the grove. And a pi-dog, cast off by the patrons to whom it had attached itself, stood looking —thinking—snuffing vainly up and down the bank. Then, with an intelligence worthy of domesticated ancestors, the poor beast made its way along-stream to the village, comforted its puppies, and subsequently might have been seen anxiously inspecting each moored houseboat in grassy curves and shaded nooks of the small river's loops till this merged its flow in the wide current of the main Sind. There, with cringing air and tucked-in tail it must have adventured crossing the bridge.

But how, by what mysterious instinct, or information gained from snuffing talk with Ganderbal pi-dogs, did this creature know that its particular quest lay on the

far side of the stream under the shady trees, not the near side of grazing-meadows and brown farms ?

Who can say ? Maybe the poor animal wandered trying both banks, where then lay some forty-three house-boats, besides their attendant craft. Anyway, by five o'clock next morning, there she sat on her haunches opposite Veraswami's tiny cabin, which he shared with lamps and boots, watching till that benefactor looked out in the fresh greyness, brass lotah and wooden tooth-scrubber in hand, as does every caste-respecting Hindu.

This move of the camp and boats was determined by Brabble the day of Captain Hopkins' visit, partly that the mosquito plague after sundown was increasing to become hurtful, if not actually dangerous, and known to be most abounding among willow foliage. Also that the boat-manjis anxiously reported the stream as falling rapidly. Once stuck, no remedy remained for a heavy houseboat but to hire coolies—scarce and dear during the paddy-crop labour—and build a dam, or dams. If these means failed to refloat the vessel, disastrous consequences ensued, to owner, tenants and severely-fined manji.

Now the friendly flotilla made the tail of a seemingly endlessly long-drawn line of lumbering arks or doongas, furthest of all from the small bazar under the big trees, and post-office.

Society picnicked up-stream for over a mile, but here stretched an almost solitary half-mile of idyllic riverside lawn, while if the famous trees were diminished in numbers, enough still fringed the grass to give shelter from at least the early sun.

Here were different mountain views, a wider gleaming river where all day infants waded naked, men speared fish or dredged flotsam, and at sunset water-snakes swam.

Brabble's orders, suddenly issued, were obeyed with the swift ease of Indian flittings. "Bowman, you'll help move your colonel on board the *Sharp Ship*—he'll glide

down without a jolt. Nurse Lyttle is called back to Srinagar to-morrow, more's the pity. But she can be spared now, for none of us, it's to be hoped, will need her services any more. Very good indeed they were, nurse."

With a touch of patronage a squat colossus nodded.

"One of us does, sir; that's *me!*" instantly announced Hopkins, who stood close to the trim, white-garbed nurse. ("Let's tell and get it over? We've lost time enough and too much. Righto!"—this in an appealing aside.) Then in a public-speaker manner to the assembled group: "Ladies and gentlemen, allow me the honour to inform you that—hem, hem—that Lady Louisa—I mean to say, Nurse Lyttle . . . Oh, dash it! *Loo*, I've begun a speech and don't know how to end up."

"It is only to say that this autumn, after all my cases at the Cottage Hospital are finished—(*No;* certainly not sooner!)—I am engaged to nurse Captain Hopkins for good, having known him before I ever trained and believing he needs looking after," supplied Sister Lyttle, in a brave but small voice, trying to look demure, though plainly nervous.

When the outburst of congratulations, with encores, and thanks from the leading lady and gentleman were ended, curiosity, which was general, gleaned from both separately and distributed generously the following details. Said Hoppy, looking over his shoulder to make sure the lady of his love could not hear: "Between ourselves, strictly in confidence, her father was a holy terror. A snobbish old aristocrat; nose of a vulture; mind of a Pathan. He thought his ancestors the salt of the earth because they robbed, murdered, or mutilated every honest, industrious merchant they could waylay; though he'd kowtow to any Toby Filljug who had bought a handle to a name stinking with sweated wealth. My family being in business, of course he'd as soon have allowed his daughter to marry a dustman as me; though he'd

sown such a crop of wild oats, the poor girl hadn't half a loaf—no, not a halfpenny bun, to live on."

Said Lady Louisa, otherwise Sister Lyttle: "Don't tell my John Edward, but I now think I was a goose not to run off with him. He asked me half a dozen times, but I refused him, just to make an obstacle-race of it."

"And then—?" asked Peg.

"Then he was ordered suddenly to India. He wrote—my parent intercepted the letter, and replied something particularly nasty. I never knew—but, goodness forgive me! I supposed my dear lad was the cad my father called him. So I became a nurse."

Now could be seen how Hopkins had earned his reputation for smartness in action. By sundown he was engaged to be married, had demolished his plans of mahseer-fishing, and also chartered a disengaged cook-boat, supervising its cleansing and furnishing with cushions, rugs and provisions against to-morrow's dawn. Then going along the bund, mimicking the cry of a box-wallah, till every female head flew out at the lure of "China silk, huzoor—cheap, memsahib," he triumphantly grinned.

"Come and see the last of the pink lotus in flower. Will you do me the honour? Roof shade and grub guaranteed. Fact is, I'm seeing Lady—Nurse—*my* Loo back to her treadmill, and it's the shortest way through the Anchar Lake; all the shop-boats come so. Bowman held out for the mail tonga, but I've persuaded him. So let's all make a day of it, and those bound for Srinagar with me will go up the Mar canal. But I'll send you all safe back, and tea on board. See?"

Despite self-snubbings, how at this respite of a whole morning before seeing the last, maybe for life, of the man whom she now knew undisguisedly she still loved—better than ever—how faint hopes sprouted anew in Peggy's sad heart that night. Like daisies on a lawn

one has thought ruthlessly sheared by the mowing-machine, their heads wanly smiled at her next morning. Her shyness when near Hopkins amounted to misery, remembering how he had witnessed her day of happy wooing on the Dal Lake. She writhed, fancying how all the others must be terming her, "*Poor thing*" in puzzled compassion; half thought of refusing to accompany the party, but that Loo wound both arms around her and begged and coaxed. Even then Peggy never guessed that the lotus expedition sprang from Hoppy's brain unaided to help herself, that he fairly squirmed lest he should be "a beastly reminder to the pair." Only his promised bride knew proudly, telling herself he was chivalrous to his blunt finger-tips.

"Stay and be my bridesmaid," begged little Lady Loo.

"No. No. Don't ask me, dear. I'm going home with the Brabbles, starting next week. That's to say——"

A look of meaning was lingeringly exchanged between the two girls.

CHAPTER XXXV

PINK LOTUS

THE morning tearfully smiled as the lotus-seekers embarked on their cushioned cook-boat; its thatched roof lined and festooned with the brightest muslin draperies that Hopkins could worry out of the Ganderbal boat-stores. Soft showers could not so much be said to drip now and again as rather to hang in a state of suspension. Mists hid half the mountains or stole in mysterious searchings along their flanks; still the steely water showed reflections at times resembling old engravings.

The course for Srinagar lay along the wider branch of the Sind river, bending leftwards among damp level pastures, flat as Holland, which for a little space this part of the valley resembled so long as the environing mountains were mist-hidden. For *meels* the river looped by low green banks, where herds of black or brown cows, again reminiscent of the Low Country, browsed or stared mild-eyed. To reach the Anchar Lake was their first stage, whence in smaller boats the Srinagar party would push on.

But now—now—how one among those on board grudged the fleeting precious minutes of silvery sunshafts or lingering mist. To Peggy the hours sped as were she a sentenced wretch being taken to execution.

Would no reprieve—none, come from yonder stern young Daniel sitting in judgment, his back relentlessly turned on her, though his shapely head might incline a little, and that rarely, towards one or other of his neighbours?

Banter and pleasantries began to be exchanged from the start, naturally enough seeing that Hopkins was host and had captured several of the merriest souls he could find in the houseboat fleet moored at Ganderbal. Mrs. Brabble was comfortably bemoaning that soon the bride-elect must be formally addressed as Lady Louisa instead of their dear little Nurse Lyttle that came so pat.

"If any of you, my friends, call me Louisa, my hair will turn straight," cried the fiancée, whose wavy blue-black tresses made the threat terrifying to contemplate. "Lady Loo Lyttle I have been, and little Lady Loo is what I always will be."

If ever talk flagged, everyone fell back on mosquitoes, as at home they would on the weather. Each victim vied in declarations of being chief sufferer. "Positively they came in such a cloud last night, I felt the fanning of their wings," wailed one. "So they did with us. So many fell in the lamp they almost put it out," cried another. "But for flies, mosquitoes and the heat on the boat-roofs, river life in Kashmir would be paradise," all agreed.

Then, while the men had a turn among themselves as to mahseer-fishing, the feminine portion of the group discussed with unfailing zest the Srinagar tailors, their marvellous skill in making divided skirts for riding or the mountains. Brabble, who, mentally mounted on his profession as on the fence between the two sexes, lent an ear to each, sat watching his chance to drop a good story on either side.

"D'you know—have you heard—did I tell the story of my wife and the tailor in Madrid?" he now reiterated

till attention was secured. His spouse, as usual, raised a deprecating unheeded protest, though never a feature of her placid countenance altered.

"Edgar! My dear—hush—don't. And you know it was not me, but——"

"A capital joke," hurried on her husband. "She went to a Madrid dressmaker to be fitted, and was shown upstairs into a drawing-room with a long looking-glass, all as usual. Nobody was there, so to hurry matters my wife began undressing, and was out of her gown and goodness knows how much more——"

"*No!*" interrupted Mrs. Brabble, stirring like an animated feather-bed. "One doesn't. You all know." (This in appeal to the gentler hearers; but on all alike it fell flat, regrettably so as to the men, who were now most attentive.)

"Anyway, *there she was!*" took up Brabble, with a theatrical flourish, "when in came a strange lady, who stood appalled, and a Spanish gentleman behind. The consternation of the señora was so evident that my poor wife, not knowing any Spanish, took refuge in English. At last it was the don in the background who had a go at French and managed to make her understand she had got by mistake into a private house, and the hostess thought her mad!"

Whatever merriment the tale evoked, it was unshared by one small but conspicuous member of the party. David ended comments by a contemptuous yawn. His presence there was due to general intercession, for his stern-minded mother had decreed yesterday that owing to naughtiness he would not be allowed to come. It appeared he had laid hands on the whole dessert-dish of cherries to feed his pony, "giving it cherrystonitis," put in Brabble, and when a remnant was rescued by Pollyann his howls lasted until Mrs. Drax herself appeared. Believing her presence inspired awe, she ended admonitions

by the trustful observation: "There. Now you are not going to cry any more. You are going to be a good boy!"

"No," said David, "I'm only resting."

Now his evident boredom at the elders' dullness found relief in a chant addressed from the boat's side to winds, waters, earth, in childhood's sense of communion with the elements. "I'm going on the sea. I'm going home on the sea. I'm going to see the sea and all the *din-dummis!*"

Of course he at once became the centre of notice; was beset by questionings, which was exactly what the small man resented.

With sullen lowered brow he refused to be coaxed into explanations, evidently suspecting a trap of the grown-ups to catch him in a mistake and laugh at him.

Only when Diana's arm encircled him, who never laughed, he muttered, reclining stiffly against her shoulder:

"Pollyann teached me. It's Sunday lessons why little boys can't make a mess on that day 'cos everysing else was made."

It was Bruce of all present who first understood. Bruce—Peggy would hardly have believed it—who, with an inflection in his voice she had never heard, a quiet comradeship, fatherliness, ranged himself on the little fellow's side, adding both look and gesture of friendly alliance.

"Of course. I know. Used to repeat it myself in the Fourth Commandment. It's one of those words not much used, so people forget it when they get old. It means all the blooming queer fish, old chap, that you'll see. Flying fish, and jolly little fellows called nautilus, that put up a kind of sail. They are all dindummis."

A silly woman from the Ganderbal "Park Lane" boats here announced her belief that David was an angel, and pretended to feel for his wings.

He wriggled. "Don't want zem. How could I go to sleep if I'd wings on my back?"

"We'll all have to wear them in heaven," she tittered.

David eyed her with dislike. She wore nose nippers, a jampot hat, and had a mouth like a snapping terrier. "Has God wings?" he asked.

There was a lull at this, but before his mother could frame a suitable response the Silly One incautiously tried evasion, putting on an edifying gravity as she quoted shakily, "By the overshadowing . . .

"Of—(dear me! how does it go?)—gold and silver wing."

"Den I won't say prayers any more," declared David firmly. "I'm not going to pray to a chuck-chuck!"

And Mrs. Drax had some ado not to show her displeasure with the meddlesome woman who had impressed her foolish scrawls on the pure page of the child's mind.

Of all the lovely lakes in the Happy Valley, Anchar is reputed the least fascinating; but perhaps, because therefore less frequented by tourists, its bird-life is the most varied and abundant.

Now, as the picnic-boat glided out into a mile-wide surface of water, covered in large patches by small white water-lily or other weeds, and banked by low willow fringes, there rose and flew any number of wild fowl. Were those snowy flocks in the middle distance paddy-birds or a species of gull? so the men debated. Nearer flights of fat thrush-sized birds were voted attractive by reason of their pied wings and bodies. But an universal O—h! of delighted admiration greeted a Beauty that passed straight as an arrow over the water. With snow-white wings, its graceful long body and still longer tail were both of deepest sable velvet, the effect of skimming lightness beautiful as that of a dragon-fly.

Ceasing poling, the men took now to their heart-shaped paddles, driving the boat towards a long reed-bank

half a mile away. Rounding a corner, everyone on board, including the natives, uttered an exclamation of delight. There in a calm lagoon flowered all around for half a mile the famed pink lotus. Out of brakes of great disc leaves rose noble chalices larger than pink peonies at home and of the same shade. Most were on stems two or three feet high, but several soared far higher, seeking light above intruding reeds. Reflected in the water, the double thickets made a glorious sight, whilst the curious platter leaves, each upheld on a stalk like the stem of a stand, glittered with raindrops diamond-powdered.

Among the lotus stood a heron with black and white plumage so heavy he seemed far larger than his slim grey British brother.

Rose and gold. Looking into the flower-hearts like giant tulips with their inverted cone seed-pods surrounded by a thick spray of golden filaments, who can wonder that Lakshmi, the goddess, is said by pious Hindus to have arisen from a pink lotus?

Here, by general consent, lunch began. The rowers rested, some landing on an islet to eat their rice unwatched by the Feringhees. The latter were all too busy themselves to heed anything but helping, hindering; handing snipe, fish, mayonnaise, or the Kashmir chicken, created out of toughest rope-twine and skin; longing for the cold pressed beef or veal-and-ham pie forbidden to be so much as named in this country; revelling in piles of pears, apples, peaches, while corks popped and native-made lemonade and soda-water fizzed.

None was more useful amongst the party than Peggy. It was she who was called on to mix the salad-dressing, cut bread, open tinned delicacies the men were bungling. A born housekeeper, she was here, there, everywhere; capable, praised by all—but one.

The daisies were shorn from Peggy's poor lawn of green

hope by now. (In her mind all the while thoughts were repeating themselves so insistently she almost feared they might escape in outcry: *"He has not spoken to me; has never looked at me! Did he read that letter? Did he destroy it unread? In an hour the end of all will come!"*)

It was evident to others interested that Bruce was displaying what Hopkins later denounced as devilish ingenuity in avoiding so much as giving or receiving salt or butter from his whilome love. Lady Loo tried some small wiles, but was stopped by a whispered warning from her dragoon. "Chuck it! You will put his back up." She could only keep a place for her friend between herself and Diana; chatter to cover the silent misery so close to her side, and give convulsive small squeezes of Peggy's arm.

As usual talk turned on the Indian climate; its rains, hot seasons; on when each one hoped to "go home." Argument arose as to whether it was worse to stew in the plains or be bored by the gossip and petty quarrels in hotels on the heights.

India is a land of extremes, all agreed. Said Bruce Bowman abruptly: "India is a country of hill-stations and hell-stations. I prefer the hills. Those on the North-West Frontier, like our fort, are bearable. Something after our best clubs in London; no ladies allowed."

The Silly Woman cried "Wretch!" affectedly. Hopkins took up the challenge.

"Give me the jolly fat plains. I agree with a Tommy I overheard once talking about the hills with his pals. He said: 'It's like livin' on the spike of yer 'elmet with the infernal regions around.'"

Half an hour later, when the boatmen were rested, came the move. All looked once more around. Two—a man and a girl—knew the scene was never to fade from their memory. Here they saw almost the last of each other, aching in heart to anguish. But pride—proper

pride—must, as so often before with unhappy lovers, keep them apart.

The rosy-white lotus made gorgeous masses of colour; full-blown goblets or closed buds, still greenish, though rose-flushed. Behind, a willow grove was outlined against the grey sky, and further still distant mountains veiled and unveiled themselves in mist-clouds. A heron standing among reeds showed his white neck and head, then at the splash of paddles flapped heavily away.

They crossed the wide lake. Some trees showed the entrance to the canal, where small boats awaited the town-bound departing friends. Making a feint that his kit was badly bestowed, Bruce clambered hastily into his shikara, standing upright as if about to return for good-byes. But—he stayed.

("My poor dear! He cares still or he would behave better. I'd far rather be treated brutally than with indifference," whispered Loo, hugging Peggy in a farewell embrace.)

"Salaams, everybody!" called out Bruce, giving a wave to his deerstalker headgear and continuing to hold it up, by way of atoning politeness. "Good luck to you all!" Heavens! how like he was to the Opie portrait of Peggy's great-grandfather, who had been his ancestor also. With his golden-brown head bared, his blue eyes shining wildly; frank of face, slight of build, yet broad-shouldered, he was indeed a goodly figure of a man.

The sky darkened and a heavy shower drove down as they were rowed back across the lake. With curious effect the drops splashed up white from the grey water in a million tiny spurts. The rain ceased and a chorus of rejoicing came from the feathered denizens of the thickets. Swallows darted over the surface of the lake, and some of their young dotted the tips of the reeds on which they rested.

David, bless him! fell asleep with his head in Peggy's

lap. Like will to like, and she was the youngest of the party save himself. To avoid rousing him she could be silent, unnoticed. Later on, in the nullah, he woke, and after tea, for which they stopped, as also to rest the Kashmiris, Diana abruptly invited Peggy to join her and the boy for some exercise on the bund. The rest preferred their cushions.

About a mile from the houseboat quarter, in green solitude, where the grass lawn and its sentinel splendid chenars began, two figures came in sight pacing slowly under the patriarchal trees. They were Roma and her invalided soldier; his solitary arm clasped hers tight.

Hitherto Diana had never uttered a word during the walk except in answer to David's prattle. Now she muttered brusquely, "Come down by the riverside." Ah! the priceless boon when friends know when to be silent.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE DOWER COTTAGE

THE scent of lilacs and of new-mown grass filled the May air.

A wayfaring man found them pleasant to his nostrils as he sat on the aged wooden foot-rail to a grave. The churchyard, long ago disused for burial, had a year back been planted with roses by the lady of the manor, who also placed benches where the living might rest o' evenings, as did the hamlet forefathers under the sod.

Quite young, this lady of the manor—so the sexton said, himself willing to stop a few minutes and chat sociably with the stranger, whose decent clothes and self-respecting manner showed him a cut above a tramp bound for the nearest union. Yes, indeed; only a child she was the other day, as it seemed like. But with a head on her shoulders. Lives in the Dower Cottage beyond that fence with her governess. A great one for making folks happy—— "There comes the Reverend Dobson. He'll maybe want me."

Left alone, the wayfarer glanced curiously at the ancient twisted chimneys of a black-and-white small dwelling almost hidden by a bower of laburnums dropping showers of gold, mingled with the white balls of Guelder roses, and the mock-orange seringa. Higher, sturdy hawthorn spread flakes of sweet snow-blossom, while even

lovelier scarlet thorn-bushes contrasted in beauty. Chestnut trees embowered the group; their white or red candelabra flowers like an altar of Nature's own lit for a service of thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving! The man was conscious of that emotion uppermost. He groped for some words to express himself in mind. But none came of his own thinking. Instead, words learnt or heard often in childhood rose to memory: "The merciful and gracious Lord hath so done His marvellous works that they ought to be had in remembrance."

His eyes wandered to the small river sliding between lush pastures; cattle stood knee-deep in the ford, flicking their tails lazily; sturdy oaks spread branches over the water's edge, two splendid elms massed their heavy foliage against the sky.

"Oh, England! Home! There is nothing like it on earth. My God, I am weary of exile; sick with longing for——"

The soliloquy was broken by voices in the Dower Cottage garden that sloped to the river. As if he had been listening for this, the wanderer turned his head sharply, gave a furtive look round. Then satisfied no one was near, he stooped among the yews and wooden grave head-rails, hastening towards a split oak fence. Here, still bent—for he was a tall man and shunned observation from the other side—he dropped on the grass, applying his eye to a hole that looked newly whittled. Then he saw—

A girl was standing on a flagged path among borders of sweet-william, larkspur, columbine. Her hair was bare, the shade of autumn fires, yet filled with the sun of spring. Her face was fresh as milk, rose-tinted; it held his ravished gaze, so that with a breath of surprise he murmured soundlessly: "Sweeter than I ever remember——" A voice came like the notes of a thrush.

"Old dear, can you wait for these chicken-coops to be

moved when I come back? If you wish very much I will help you now. But Mrs. Meggs's baby is not well; so I promised to look in soon."

"Ach nein! my heart's leaf! Why should my chicks hinder your good work. It was only that they like daisies. Greedy pets!"

Chirping sounds came from near by. The girl laughed.

"But you will not dream of trying to move them without help. Promise! You know I cannot trust you unless you are on honour."

"Schatz. Treasure. Am I not obedient when you ask of me? Go now. Du knowest I am glad to see you back, but haste nothing for me."

The vision moved out of the radius of the watcher's sight.

A little while he waited, listening. Then slowly rising, the man leaned his arms on the fence, looking over at an elderly woman in a mushroom-hat of enormous proportions, her dress covered by a wide blue pinafore with ample sleeves. She was stooping over a chicken-coop making crooning noises to a clutch of fluffy white chicks. Her hands pressed the prison netting plainly itching to move it—it was a large one. "Oh, weh! woe!" she sighed.

"Good morning, ma'am. Would you like me to change those chicken-runs for you?"

The good fowl-wife raised herself heavily and stared. Her eyes, that alone gave character to a flat face, brightened as they searchingly surveyed the touzle-headed, bushy-bearded unknown; dark but for a tanned complexion and bright blue eyes. She trusted and liked eyes like those; her own lit up joyfully as tapers on a Christmas-tree.

"Will you! . . . But ach! wait." . . . She rummaged in a deep secret pocket with falling countenance, apostrophising herself aloud unconsciously. "Thousand pots! Du bist one silly—de last penny clean spent since two days and Pegchen is gone out."

"I did not ask for a penny, ma'am. I asked leave to help you."

"But how is it possible? An Englishman do something for nossing?"

"If it's to please a lady like you." The wanderer vaulted the fence. "That's something. Where do you want these here villas located?"

"Over daisies. Dey all—hen-mother and babies—all lof to eat daisies. See! see!" In delight the guardian watched a hurried scratching and pecking of her charges. Then as the man brought over the remaining coops to pastures new, she exclaimed, to his gratification (for he counted on it): "Ach! how is it *not* possible?"

With the keen eye of one who had kept fowl in boyhood, the new-comer pointed out a drooping chick; put his hand over his mouth as the grieved owner cried out: "It is *seek!* Thou lieber Augustin! and there is chicken-pox in the village."

A few moments they stood conversing; then the governess proffered a mug of cider, and he ducked his head under the rustic porch and drank, observing with an admiration of the scene that held some reservation: "A pretty spot, ma'am. But rather small for a man to live in."

"We want no man. . . . We will here live without any man. . . . Oh, good-nights! Look at dat mischief cat!" With the agitation of a feather-bed being suddenly shaken Fräulein Maier hastened to shoo an orange intruder with a missing paw that told tales of poaching, from the neighbourhood of her row of desirable detached residences.

The intruder took a glance round, shrewd, sharp, as would, say, a soldier on the North-West Indian Frontier in a bazar to see the lie of things in general—yet not seeming to raise an eyelash. Then he re-vaulted the fence and departed towards the village.

A short time later he leant over a yard-gate chatting to

a small girl whose candle-box on wheels he only that morning mended.

Idle. Still his mood suited the sleepy afternoon air of the hamlet, that looked as if newly unpacked from cotton-wool. Each neat house, with shining panes and trim, blooming garden-front, had put on its clean cap and apron before evening tea, and peacefully folded its hands awhile.

Behind him in the sexton's cottage sounded voices in consultation, mingled with an infant's fretful wailing, that gradually seemed soothed. A girl's clear voice sounded from the threshold:

"That's better, dearie—so-ooh. I will give her back to you now, Mrs. Meggs. And mind you send for me again if you think she is not so well. Who is that—a stranger?"

"I will, indeed, Miss Margaret. Bless you, if you'll excuse the liberty, but it's wonderful how our Bessie quiets when you get her in your arms. It's a fair miracle; so I was saying only yesterday to Meggs. That person, Miss Lee——?" The sexton's wife lowered her voice, still the listening idler caught the words. "He's a—well, Meggs, he got talking to him last night at the 'Bag o' Nails,' and says he's quite well-informed. Come from sea lately; and been in hospital, he has; and now going on foot to see his friends somewhere Cheshire way."

The individual in question now knocked the ashes from his pipe, and slouched onwards, taking, however, a keen, long look at the girl in the porch. The same girl whose bare head he had so admired; yet her straw hat threw so becoming a shade over her brow she looked even more bewitching in it—were that possible.

For reasons best known to himself, it appeared wiser to avoid, however, the village benefactress; so meaning to take by chance the lane leftwards, he stepped aside as a motor whirled up. It stopped.

"I say, will you do me a kindness?" called a voice

with the unmistakable sound of being used to command, never lost even when, as now, asking a service of an inferior. "My motor cannot turn in that lane, and I want these letters posted."

The post-office showed a gaping slit mouth, appropriately enough forming part of a sweetshop close by.

"Right you are, sir," mumbled the wayfarer in his beard; his shoulders rounded themselves as he came forward, with head bent.

"You look as if you had done some drill," put in another slow, incisive voice; and a parchment face with shrewdly appraising eyes scrutinised the tramp. "What were you in?"

An instant's hesitation; then a gruff, "Volunteer; Boer business; commissariat." Saluting the first speaker, a one-armed soldier-like man with iron-grey hair, the wayfarer tramped on to the post office, with a handful of letters. He was gone a few seconds before the purring car bestirred itself.

"Hum! Where have I seen a back like that?" murmured number two of the masculine occupants, noticing that the departing ex-volunteer became more upright as the car whizzed round a corner—it was a low hedge. The two ladies in the back seat observed nothing, being occupied with the antics of an Australian terrier pup, the largest feature of whose black penwiper person was a remarkably red and obtrusive tongue.

"Devilish near shave that?" said the wayfarer to himself, and his beard twitched. His eyes fell on the uppermost of the letters; then they protruded. "By Jingo! What luck!" His fingers tightened on the prize. As the other letters were thrust by him into the slit be managed by sleight of hand to conceal this one up his sleeve. Cottages have eyes as unexpectedly directed on one as those in a peacock's tail, he knew; and several dwellings were in this lane with no more apparent cause

for being scattered thus than might so many mushrooms in a field. The regrettable deed done, he slunk by a short cut back to the only spot where he had as yet found seclusion, namely, the churchyard; but this time he avoided the lych gate and Dower Cottage. A turnstile and path on the further side led—as he already knew—out by a right of way through a buttercup meadow to the river.

Now to enjoy the fruit of misdemeanour. Under the shade of a hazel-nut coppice the rascal stretched himself at ease; looking first long and fixedly up-meadow at woods backing a venerable seeming Elizabethan house of which the E shape and walls (he guessed of bricks fired by charcoal, not sea-coal, because of their bluish tint) attracted him as a magnet. He could discern a yew hedge, roses in flower already, strutting white pigeons. Delectable. A big sigh, almost a groan burst from him.

With an effort he took out the letter from a pocket to which he had dexterously transferred the stolen booty. Some amused satisfaction wrinkled the corners of his eyes upon extracting a long letter from the envelope. The writing straggled oddly, sloping from left to right as if the penmanship of one unused to being left-handed. It contained no cheque or banknotes. Yet after reading the first lines the man clutched the sheet with shaking fingers; eyed it gloating—unbelieving as one suddenly possessed of a treasure.

Over the page—along the next—on to the end his straining gaze fairly rushed at express speed. He flushed as the blood rose to his brain; then paled, wiping his brow. Disbelieving his senses then, slowly, deliberately he turned back to the beginning, dwelling on each word; testing its meaning, force, while a slight trembling came upon him. *It was true!*

Laying the precious missive reverently on the grass beneath his face, he raised himself on both elbows as he

lay, looking long once more at the old manor house—next at the ford close by, where the cows still sought coolness knee-deep.

"Too much! . . . Unworthy that I have been, am! . . . Besides, perhaps too late for happiness."

His head dropped, face downwards. He only stirred to pull his cap over his head and secrete the letter again. Then partly hidden by bushes, he lay so still that small birds hopped fearlessly close by. Once his shoulders heaved convulsively.

That was all.

CHAPTER XXXVII

A HAZEL COPSE

VOICES came along the river path. On so flower-scented a May afternoon, golden-lit, the speakers by rights should be lovers. Young man and maiden they were indeed; and truly enough a deeper ring than that of friendship gave the man's tone attunement with the Spring as he said:

"Seeing you strolling this way from Cowford House, I came down from the churchyard just to—to—walk back these few yards if I may. . . . Sometimes I fear it must grieve you to see your old home empty and in the hands of others."

"It is kind—too kind of you to think about that. But Cowford belongs justly to my cousin; and is in the best single hand any man could have. We all think, I am sure, Colonel Auldjo does more with one than many a man with two." So cool a voice, like a fresh April waft after showers, without her companion's warmth of May.

"None of us in the parish can do without thinking of you often, our Lady Bountiful. Lady of the Manor is the name all the people give you, in spite of my telling them you disown it. They say they got into the way of it whilst you were at Cowford and in India and cannot —or don't want to—get out of it."

"I must speak to them myself. It vexes me to appear

to claim any least right over Cowford, that always has belonged to the Bowman men. It may seem a pity that it should be empty; but Mrs. Auldjo naturally prefers her own home. Still, the colonel is doing so much in repairs and necessary alterations, and keeping up the garden so perfectly that it is in no danger of neglect. Maybe his married sister who is coming back from Canada for a year may stay there. He said vaguely one day it might be useful to some of the family as a rest-house."

"But still—the garden was of your remaking. It seems hard to cease showing your taste in it."

"Nothing is hard that is just and right." The sweet voice sounded ever so faintly severe. Then with cheerful matter-of-factness, "Besides, he refuses me nothing that I suggest; and it is at his wish that I have just been to oversee the bedding-out."

"None of us could refuse you anything. It is you who refuse—who have refused to make me happy more often than I know."

"I can help you to count," briskly. "Twice at the mothers' teas. Three times at school-treats over the bread-and-butter plates. Once—which I thought unfair—when I was dressing your hand that was scalded upsetting the boiling kettle at our picnic for London kiddies. Indiscriminately various times besides, excepting on my village Wednesday Evenings; there you have kept our compact. To-night we shall have a large party from The Mount and the Auldjos, besides Major Meredith and his wife are going to teach the men chess, whist and poker patience. If only we had more liveliness; music."

The couple approached the hazel copse. The girl was speaking fast with the intention, so an eavesdropper guessed, of giving no ~~fresh~~ opportunity of being refused to the suitor. But he would not be gainsaid; the spring spirit fired him to risk all.

"Miss Lee—Margaret! If I dare to call you by that

sweet name this once, let that prove my desperation. A terrible fear has come to me newly. As rumour declares you have refused every single eligible man of the countryside, a foolish hope survived in my breast it might be because—but no matter! Now in the dead of night I woke last Saturday, cold and quaking, thinking: 'She is attached to someone—perhaps in India—or even engaged.'"

Dead silence. Only in the copse some grass was torn up by the roots. In pitiful humiliation the pleader hurried on again.

"Forgive me. Pray, pray, forgive me! If only I knew. It was our mutual friend, the younger Miss Mimms, who, having guessed my secret trial, offered in the most sisterly way some consolation. . . . I forget if she suggested. . . . My head spins! As I say, if only I knew!"

"If you knew, would you promise to end this useless —excuse the word—importunity?" The hitherto wholesome matter-of-factness of the girlish voice now clothed itself in dignity.

Sorrowingly a hesitating suitor stammered: "I—I—feel I ought to do so; If there is no hope I—will bury myself —in parish work."

"There is no hope. I am not engaged, but I was—even twice. My heart was not in one engagement. The other—was my first and I think it will be my last real love. Good-bye. I prefer to go back alone."

Again a silence. In the copse the wayfarer's head was pressed low in a patch of thyme. As the bruised fragrance rose to his nostrils a flood of ecstasy overwhelmed his soul to faintness. Presently he was roused by his shoulder being shaken.

"Wake up, my friend. This is bad—come! I am sadly afraid you have had too much beer."

"Cheer up, guv'nor." There was a humorous twinkle in the fellow's eyes, with a good-natured inflection of

gruff voice which showed his superior no offence was meant. "But, *con*sidering that a raythe pretty girl called Ellen, I believe, came across from the Vicarage yesterday evening for some beer for the reverend—theirs having run short, she said—and that I drank just so much as you got and no more since—Well! it do seem like as if there was one law for the vicar and one for the tramp."

"I apologise. Still, seeing you idling here——"

"Again like yourself, sir; quite remarkable how our minds run parallel. We may agree about another pull o' beer to-night at the 'Bacchanalians.'"

"'The Bacchanalians.' What do you mean to convey?"

"Ain't that the derivation of the Bag o' Nails public-house? It's a queer name, so I asked old Job what it come from and he told me. That's the same ancient who's got some morris steps nobody else remembers."

"I've never heard of either; and I've been here two years. I must tell Miss Lee. . . . By the way, will you do me—or a young lady—a good turn. Meggs, the sexton, speaks well of you and tells me you were playing the accordion in the bar last night—a champion, was his expression."

"He spoke well to me of you, sir; and with better knowledge. In what way can I oblige?"

"Well, this happens to be Wednesday, when our village shops close for half-holiday. Now we have got up (to be exact, a young lady has got up) Wednesday Evenings, when we all, without distinction of class, meet in the village hall which we (I mean, she) erected. It is our—I should say, her—idea that winter evenings in the country are long and dull."

"It's a notion might occur," the tramp put in; rather unfairly, seeing his instructor only paused out of impressive habit.

"Games, my friend; good games are good for us all,

young and old, to dispel gloom. But to be known they need to be taught. We—she, I mean—resolved to give the village more of this kind of thing—" The speaker kicked one foot in the air deliberately. " I threw myself into the scheme from its inception, and have taught draughts, backgammon and Up Jenkins."

" My eye ! " commented the tramp.

" She—I mean the foundress—got up a village play, written and acted by our own people. And we—she—meditates old English dances."

" I say. That's goin' it."

" To-night we shall be glad if you will drop in and partake in our recreation. Proceedings seem trending, however, towards possibly too reserved if discreet a programme. Therefore I—she—we will welcome a slight infusion of—ah——"

" Liveliness, Moosic." The wayfarer avoided a startled eye turned upon him, stretched himself as if waking fully. " Proud, I'm sure, me and the old girl, which I call my accordion. Nothin' sung bar wot the youngest lady can hear without a blush. I pledge my word. It's a pleasure to oblige you, sir ; likewise the foundress, besides they, or as one might say, he, she and it of the village."

" Good man ! " ejaculated the superior, jovial fashion.

" No, sir ; excuse me. You're that—and a gentleman."

Touching his cap, he walked away.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

SUNSET SEAT

THIS same evening much preparation for a festive repast was being made in the Dower Cottage, for The Mount party were invited.

"Won't you all come out into the garden first? My Tudor bower (is that correct, Auntie Roma?) is so tiny," smiled Peggy. "I asked you all early, because Uncle Phil will love my orchard, I know. And you, dear lady (turning to his cheery, chestnut-haired spouse), are hopefully expected to admire Fräulein's chickens. Then will you excuse a cold collation—except for hot soup—as the maids are coming also to our evening entertainment."

"I not. For me, the moonlight, and the peace and mein Schiller. Then to my federbett and schleep—Pegglein! laugh; it is good to make laugh. And when one can choke, like me, in a foreign language, that means one does know it." Fräulein Maier beamed placidly on the guests from the largest arm-chair.

"Ah, the apple blossom!" Major Meredith's mummy face was lit by the twinkling of his gladdened eyes. "But my Dot and I would love to saunter round the orchard arm in arm. We will talk over it afterwards on boiling evenings at Pindi, when dust-storms are our only breezes."

"Oh, yes, and my old man must see the chicks with me," added his inseparable partner.

If—a mere faint supposition, light as dandelion-seed—if Peg vaguely heard a whisper of fancy in the back of her busy mind, that Uncle Phil might chance to mention someone on the North-West frontier—Oh, of course, she never really entertained the thought ! But, if she did, as hostess it behoved her quickly to fall in with the company's disposition. Contrary to her expectation, it was the Auldjo couple, whom she saw often, who now claimed her attention.

" I have not had a chat with you for two whole days." Roma linked her arm affectionately, drawing Peggy to Sunset Seat, a favourite evening resting-place of the Dower Cottage owner and her friends, under a rustic roof of red honeysuckle. Colonel Auldjo followed, making a third. This was usual ; but not so that Roma's forehead puckered, forming square, so to speak, against some coming trouble. The girl she so long had befriended at once recognised the unconscious signal, wondering.

" We both wanted a quiet talk ; but there were always other callers when you came, lately, to The Mount, dear ; and now we are off for our London season the day after to-morrow, with nine hundred and ninety-nine things between whiles to be done. But you really must change your mind, and come up for half the time, Peggy dearest, as you won't come for all. At your age to root so strongly is—is—to be earthbound."

It was not like Roma to start aside from her topic, like a shying mare. All three knew that uneasily.

" Is there anything very special you want to talk over before you go to Court and our new county member to his House club in Westminster ? " Peggy's smile was sedately hopeful (of the best), her tone that of still champagne. After all, if much of her sparkle was vanished in the past year and a half, since youth and high spirits ran gay riot in the Vale of Kashmir, yet she was still—Peggy Lee.

" Well, yes, dearest. At least, it concerns you and

Ralph more. He has been wishing to tell you a project in his mind for a long time. But what with our staying all last winter in Burma and Ceylon and then dawdling in Italy until the London season began.—Yes, and his being asked so suddenly to stand for our division, and the tiresome election business, then the autumn session, all these took up time so much that only lately——" Mrs. Auldjo paused, having strayed once more, this time seemingly into a bog.

"Cousin Peggy is no doubt thinking that I should be able to do my own explaining," quietly put in Ralph Auldjo, in his level, strong manner. "But the matter concerns Cowford. And fearing it might not be altogether agreeable, I thought of writing to you to-morrow (for my resolve has only been signed, sealed, and dispatched by post to-day). Roma, however, feels certain you would rather hear from ourselves. . . . But, my dear" (this to his wife hastily), "I think you can really tell better than I can; so I will leave you and Peggy together."

Colonel Auldjo beat so sudden a retreat behind lilac bushes, that the two women were alone before they realised his intention.

"Dearest. Tell me the worst! He has not *sold* Cowford?" Peggy turned pale, but asked firmly, as one prepared for ill news.

"Goodness gracious! no. Why, rather than commit such a crime he would give it back to you. That is the one and only point on which Ralph and I differ and always shall. Cowford, to my mind, was and still should be your property. A woman not to hold it?—absurd!"

"I am not sure that I agree. I never was certain, you remember. Then he is not lending it indefinitely to his sister—having no brother? No. Has he *let* it?" In resigned but anticipatory misery of voice.

"No, no. But, as you know, the only other Bowman man is—Bruce! . . . *Yes;* Ralph has made a legal

gift of it to him, without even telling him beforehand or asking him to consent; lest Bruce might refuse out of quixotism, or some other such-like reluctance. Only this morning we sent off the letter. In any case, at Ralph's death Cowford Manor is willed to Bruce. So as we two have been often saying to each other, it seems a pity to leave the dear old house empty; for my husband prefers The Mount. And I own that I am very, very thankful, my dear, to remain in my own home." Roma was speaking as fast now as hitherto she had lingered. One glance stolen sideways showed her an ashen face. The motherly heart yearned over the girl she had so long befriended. But open sympathy would be ill-timed, so she leaned forward, emphasising her points with prods of her parasol at a daisy-tuft.

"Perhaps you never heard how ill the poor boy has been with enteric, and long weeks in hospital; at least, I never liked to write that to you. He is convalescent now, thank goodness; but though we wrote entreating him to come (India never agreed with him and he has never liked it), the last mail only brought an evasive reply. Mussoorie might do well enough—there was not much to call him back to England now his sisters were all married and that he saw Ralph was busied body and mind on all-night sittings in the House. They two are like brothers, or more than brothers. Besides, we really do not want the money; Ralph has his own small fortune. And what is mine is ours, and his is mine also."

Stillness on the Sunset Seat. Rosy islands floated in an amber western sky, whilst village sounds of playing children, home-bound protesting geese, or bark of dog came, softened by distance, to the ear. Grieving, Roma stole an arm in gentlest embrace round the girl's waist, so near, so dear, but enwalled by that freezing silence.

"Dear child. Perhaps a letter would have been better, after all; only it might have failed to express our troubled

feelings. To you this may bring some—awkwardness. But to *him*—God grant it will surely bring back health, even insure life! For we have heard he has twice exposed his recklessly in the last punitive expedition."

The supple young body quivered as its encircling girdle felt. From the chestnut trees came a tender cooing. At that Peggy started, a note of agony in her outcry.

"Those ring-doves! I cannot bear them. They remind me of the chenars—of that dreadful grove——"

She sprang up, Roma in pity setting her prisoner free. Hiding her face in a cluster of lilacs, Peggy remained thus some seconds. Then whatever secret rebellion against fate had stirred her to betray feelings long jealously guarded seemed conquered. Still with her back turned, she yet spoke quietly, gratefully.

"Thank you, dearest, with my whole heart. All is arranged for the best, and it will be best."

Next, as a trim maid showed herself at the end of the flagged path:

"There, it is feeding-time. We must gather the others." In a somewhat quavering call, words strange to the apple trees went forth, in air-waves rippling on the pink and white blossoms.

"*Qui hai! Khana, huzoors!* Hurry up, *juldi, memsahibs!* Tomasha evening. Yessir. Allright. (Wonder if that is all right. The one thing I do regret is that nobody ever says 'Yessir' to me any more.)"

And if the mistress of the Dower Cottage looked a trifle pale when her banquet began in the small, low-beamed room, she soon flushed to a rose-tipped Margaret as she watched over her guests' welfare and listened to their familiarly frank praises of her housewifely excellence.

"Never tasted a salad to equal this since that one your Ooti boy made on the river at Ganderbal," Major Meredith declared, with relish.

"Ah, yes, Veraswami. If only he could stand our

climate," sighed the joint former mistresses of the Indispensable, who had written (by means of a bazar babu), "how pleased his chillens were with the cloths and his wife with the Kashmiri shaal, so kindly sent by their goodness, and how he himself ever remained their humble servant and footstool."

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE VILLAGE PLAY CLUB

A FULL night, as Job the ancient remarked three times running to his neighbours, with ever-increasing glee, the while he smoked seated comfortably in a spindle-backed arm-chair. The Play Club members were mustered in force, and diversified games taxed the wit of the foundress to keep one end of the common room fairly undisturbed for the card-players. Luckily its shape lent itself to a division in three parts, for two cottages knocked into one made a square U of the club portion, the centre, as with other bodies, being discreetly reserved for purposes of food.

In one side, therefore, the Auldjos and Merediths were dispersed at different tables, as teachers; the new M.P. deep in chess with Meggs, the schoolmaster and the "Bag o' Nails" owner. Mrs. Auldjo—the name seems unfamiliar in these pages, but how thrice blessed a change to herself!—Roma, rather, as leader of poker patience showed brilliant strategy, her hands poised, ready for swift darts; an eager competitor being discovered in the village dressmaker. As to cooncan, Mrs. Meredith vied with Ellen, the Vicarage parlourmaid, whose genius rivalled the visitor's skill and was heartily admired by the blacksmith. But the most laughter, even to screams of merriment, came from Major Meredith's circle, where, "I love my love"

with an A B or C was his new and popular form of instruction.

As Peggy herself, in the opposite side of the U, strove with the hardest task, namely, of amusing sedate mothers of stirring urchins too weary of quelling tumult to care for action—and also Job and his mates, in years all ripe for sedative entertainment—came unlooked for help.

The vicar had gallantly been trying to infuse vigour into a rather languishing spelling competition, introduced with inappropriate giggles by the Misses Mimms. They were the daughters of a former incumbent, referred to by some in the village as the late incubator; and the youngest owned much ashen fair hair that had an attractive trick of coming down frequently, necessitating apologies with titters and refastening loosely with a comb.

"Halloa! here he is!" The vicar hastened to greet a tall black-haired and bushy-bearded man whose slouching entrance was hailed with nods and friendly smiles by half the village.

"This is a stranger, Miss Lee; but a capital chap, called Atkins. He has promised to play and sing for us. Brought your accordion, eh, old man? That's right. Now then, tune up. Something rattling."

But the newcomer did not stir, seeming awkwardly waiting for his orders from the foundress, whose duties as hostess were sometimes officiously undertaken by the vicar, in spurts of zeal for which he as often reproached himself in fits of humility.

Never a word did Atkins speak; still Peggy seemed to grasp intuitively what was passing in his mind, and was gracious.

"You are welcome. If you will take my place here, I shall be glad; for I am wanted elsewhere. But I hope to come back presently to hear you." She rose: feeling a curiously pleasurable surprise.

For why. The wayfarer's bent head, deprecating gesture of hand, then humble manner of obeying, as if consciously unworthy, were such as might have befitted a beggar troubadour commanded to be seated on the throne of the chosen queen at a Court of Love in Provence. In spite of his clumsy gait on entering, the woman's quickness of perception knew that here was a man that was " a man for a' that." As she threaded her purposeful way through the playing groups there followed her the familiar strains of " Sally in our Alley."

" Of all the girls that are so smart,
There's none like pretty Sally."

The song was well received, yet the audience, which included nearly all the spelling competitors excepting those immediately under the directresses' eyes, called with appreciative acquaintanceship for, " One o' last night's. Give us 'Tom Bowling.'"

" What is wrong with the 'Yeoman's Wedding-song?' You know it, I'll bet," drawled Major Meredith's meditative voice, joining in as even his sportive kids ceased gambolling over loving their loves with N's because they were nice or neat. " Buck up, young fellow my lad! Be bold, be bold! There's luck in your eye."

His gimlet glance met a blue flash from the wanderer, who for the first time looked at him, swiftly, then bent to his instrument.

" Eh, eh, quite so. Sing out your best, young lad, my dear fellow," echoed the vicar (or so he imagined). A widow's boy, brought up by gentle women to whom he never had given a moment's anxiety, and now passing his hours among the old, sick, or the children, it was astonishing what simple joy he took in adopting any robust, manly phrase he heard for the first time, as this. His parishioners knew his foible, smiling until they grew bored. But none knew the secret dreams of heroic derring-do, of leading

a forlorn hope, of rescuing crews from burning ships or defending a fort against savage hordes, that fired his bosom during tranquil walks to visit in the parish.

"*Pleassir ! !*" A hot ploughboy, entering the club, bent on creating a flattering stir, claimed immediate attention. An old woman was taken very bad, and could not die easy, she sent word, unless her own beloved minister came to say farewell.

"Dear ! dear ! And my bicycle is badly punctured. Of course, I'll come as soon as possible."

At this the younger Miss Mimms in an audible aside begged the dear vicar not to think of going at this late hour. The old wretch had sent already three times in the last six months ; besides, she lived in the hills miles away. Probably she did not have any least intention of dying this time either.

"One never knows. Would you detain me from my manifest duty ? " was the mildly severe answer.

At that a workman, listening stolidly, offered his bike, on which he had just ridden in. "She's a bit of a bone-shaker, sir ; but she'll carry you."

The offer was accepted gratefully, when the elder Miss Mimms, who had slipped away, hastily popped a small parcel and a flask into the tool-basket fastened on the modern Rosinante. "Just some biscuits, and—refreshment," she imparted in a stage whisper. As the leader of the forlorn hope, rescuer of victims, joggled away into the dusk, calling back, "Oh, please, somebody, tell my housekeeper, Mrs. Brown, I may be kept all night, and not to think of waiting up "—nods and nudges followed amongst his flock.

"It's a fair shame. He's too good, and that makes it a temptation to other folks to take advantage, like," decided a stout woman, a chapel-goer.

There was a move back from the doorway. Inside a mellow voice was heard, carolling for all its owner was

worth. Hey! the cheery words, sing ho! the rousing strains. The rafters rang with the refrain:

"Ding dong, ding dong, I love the song!
For it is my wedding morning!"

Job the ancient beat time with his stick, his head wagged; back went his mind to times of lusty youth, when the blood ran hot in his veins, and he could put up his fists with the strongest man at any fair far or near.

The army gentleman visitor from The Mount likewise nodded to himself, though once was enough. He smiled too. What a parchment visage, with crafty, kind eyes was his. But after the first verse he slipped round into the adjoining half of the U-shaped room, where he offered himself as substitute for the foundress.

"Hullo! Going to play backgammon with the cobbler? Give me the board. A blush-rose is not created to be a cabbage. Go back and listen to that blackbird chap singing. It's worth it."

Back moved Miss Lee, with discreet smiles for her neighbours and her usual happy air while seeing to the pleasure of everyone. Yet her feet tripped; her heart sang with the song and singer; her pulses stirred, quick thrills ran along her nerves. . . . Ah! it was over, and she had missed the half.

Perforce hiding almost the whole of her chagrin, the foundress thanked the singer with composed manner, when a tempest of applause and repeated *brayvos* and *ancoars* died away. "It is not fair to ask you to sing again just yet. Still *I* should like to hear——"

"Cert'nly, mum. To please *you*. Just a trifle."

How hastily the gruff-spoken seafaring man jumped, nay, leapt at his new chance of gaining hearing, approval, as if not yet praised to the top of his bent. His fingers trembled, gripping his humble instrument, his voice quavered, if ever so slightly; and surely this was not

likely to be a popular melody, a strain—was it Neapolitan ? —no, heard elsewhere ; by some riverside, in a spring twilight—where ? *In Kashmir !*

And the words. The voice became refined, took on that indescribable intonation of good breeding well-nigh if not utterly impossible to acquire after youth. That were surprise enough, but the words ! . . . unheard before !

Hardly had she caught the beginning stanza than, signing pretext of a draught, Peggy glided to a chair in the background. Here she was unseen by the singer ; but—maddening ill-luck !—found she could only see his shaggy black head from behind. Yet she quivered.

O Rose of all roses, my lady, my fair !
Whose perfume made fragrant the wandering air,
How sweet was the twilight as glided our boat
O'er the lake on whose waters the lotus buds float.

Full sad was the hour when my true love lay dead.
Beneath the tall chenars that young life was sped.
Bring iris, white iris to deck her lone grave,
Where hums the wild bee and the willow boughs wave.

Lonely I wander,
Sadly I sigh.
Come back, beloved !
Why did you die ?

With Spring's resurrection all life has new birth.
Now green things and younglings regladden the earth.
O hearken, dear dead love, rise, rise from thy tomb !
For winter is gone and the rose is in bloom.

As sprang divine Lakshmi from pink lotus flower,
And Nature rejoicing sang praise that glad hour,
Rise, thou my heart goddess ! for lonely I wait.
Return with the springtime, come back to thy mate !

Come back, my darling,
Come back to life.
Give me forgiveness.
Come back, my wife !

CHAPTER XL

ONCE MORE

ALONE at her open lattice, Peggy looked out into the Spring night.

Alone—what relief to escape from the heat, sound, crowd ; from the friendly faces ever scanning hers, affectionately ready to note any change or the late emotion which she would have hated, despised herself for betraying.

None guessed ; not one, unless—Uncle Phil, it was true, had pressed her hand with more than usual warmth, but spoken no word. The rest mingled their unwitting good-byes with praises and gratulations, just as if the solid Cowford ground were not vanishing under Peggy's feet. How or when the stranger musician left the club-room Peggy did not know. A group of leave-takers, as his song ended, hid his departure.

Thank, thank goodness ! his song, however, was above their heads. " Mighty purty," Job the aged grumbled ; " but somehow I niver could get the hang of it."

How Peggy herself got away, out, back here, as if in a dream, she hardly knew. All seemed illusion. The village green, slipping stream, the English blossom of hawthorn, laburnum, chestnuts, ghostly in the starlight, were surely unreal. These dark masses of trees were

chenars, the old-fashioned garden, with its central flagged path, faded beneath her staring, unseeing eyes to short-cropped sward at the edge of a grove.

To the relief of being in solitude, on gaining her room Peggy hastily added freedom of restraint by tearing off her evening gown, unpinning and shaking down the masses of sun-fired hair that rippled over her shoulders mistily in the dim light as she blew out her candle. Then in a white wrapper she knelt by the open lattice, her paled face and parted lips framed in clusters of yellow roses.

In the orchard glimmered apple-blossom; scents of flowers, freshness of dew, cool night air surrounded the watcher, refreshing, soothing each and all. Whether she was aware of these, or, indeed, of any reality on earth, was doubtful in the joyous, fearful stir of the girl's soul. What she hoped, thought, felt—all was a maze.

Then from the wicket-gate came low song; so hushed that but for the silence it would not have reached the ears of one in the Cottage:

"Come down, beloved,
Come to my heart.
Come to your true love,
Never to part."

Peggy heard, and did not hesitate.

Rising at the summons, passing down the stair and out along the flagged walk, she flitted as if borne on air. There, in the deeper shadow thrown by the ivied gate-pillars, stood a man's tall figure, and disregarding his bushy beard and shaggy disguise of dark hair, she threw herself into the arms of the wayfarer.

"Peggy—my one and only love. Can you forgive? I was ill for weary weeks, in hospital. There, alone for hours, my pride, my stubborn obstinacy melted and the resolve came that if life were granted to me I would seek you out; if possible, unknown. Then, should some other, wiser

man have meanwhile succeeded in making you forget my unworthiness, I would go away in silence. If not—will you take back a humbled loyal lover ? ”

There came in answer :

“ Bruce. My own ; my Ralph Bowman ! ”

THE END

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